Writings by Maria

Prose and Poetry by Maria Sammarco
Written circa 1999 to 2009

Compiled by Riccardo May 2025,
for Carlo and Pietro Sammarco

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I will remove from your body the heart of stone
and give you a heart of flesh. (Ezekiel)

Prologue
by Maria Sammarco

When I first read the list of words springing out from Mantis* second issue theme, two visions alternated for days in my eyes. Migration as a form of translation was the first one. I purposely say migration and not emigration, because that has been part of my life for the past 33 years. I originally experienced a kind of mutation from the Mediterranean to the Anglo-Saxon culture through my emigration, but, in addition to that, every year I move to Sicily as a migrating bird to get impregnated by my culture of origin, hatching my eggs back to Canada.

The second image was the association of death to life, as the most interesting transformation of all. I met death for the first time in my life when I was four and half years old, through a key-hole of a door in a barn. In the next room Angelina, our nanny and playmate, was sleeping at a candlelight burning for the whole night; my oldest cousin taking turns at the keyhole, calling Angelina to wake up

Death has always been present in my life not only as a serious matter, but also as a fun and provoking one. At the end of one of my visits to my mother in Italy, sitting in the garden in a quiet afternoon, she asked me: “When are you leaving?”

"On Tuesday,” I answered.

"So I have only two days to die.”

To my horrified reply she continued, “If I die after you leave, how will I be able to help myself, all alone and stiff like a mummy?”

“Mom, if you are dead, why would you care?”

“You're right!” she exclaimed, and we both laughed.

In thinking and exploring about death, I find my energy enhanced, my love for life refreshed. It makes me appreciate many more moments; it makes me aware of the limited precious time I have to live.

These two images, death and migration, I consider being the spine of my life; they make me feel more and incredibly energetic. My work contains and shares this vision.

* *Mantis* is a journal of poetry, criticism, and translation

1. Search

The Ice Maiden

South Siberia.
Woman.
Tattoos like extended antlers of deer
in stone graffiti of the area.
From an old house wood was taken
to build your new home. Old broken and repaired familiar things
welcomed you.
Six Horses were killed, buried with you,
not six women for a man to honor his testicles,
pocked with lancet on the skin still soft.
Dress.
Unfolding pleats.
Hand.
Graceful resting hand.
Hole in the scull. Concussion. Brain taken away.
Fur in eye sockets. Water would drip in melting season. Decay.
Micro organisms had taken over in their season
the first two weeks in June
under the skin of your Horses.
This is when you died,
first two weeks of June,
two thousand five hundred years ago.
I need to ask you what was round you when you died.
Not yellow flowers and green grass
and black crows circling blue skies.
Do you remember singing in the evening
when the light got dim
and your lover raised against the sky,
away from your chest and you felt happiness
but you did not have a name for it.
Not the name we give it now.

I saw you
buried under milky ice,
buckets of warm water slowly defrosting
and revealing you, woman, still soft,
in sleeping position on the side.
Not dead, I remember,
gentle your body posture

light pink drapes layered over
the raw delicately woven dress.

Amazons with no breast and
fierce Syrian warriors,
Homer tells us,
superb horse riders male and female
drinking from the skulls of the enemy,
all from the same land
that once had been yours.
You are not any of this.
We know when we see your head dress
and the horses sacrificed
in your large wood chamber.
Gorgeous are your tattoos
that make us wonder.
Are they for healing or to be healed or for status.
You are not revealing. Maybe you won't.

Our vision didn't last very long.
It took two hours for the funguses to grow up
two short hours for you to die again.
So you were rushed in helicopter to Moscow.
The helicopter that lost one motor,
a frightening emergency,
landing on the high plateau.

You still talk to me and I try to understand,
among Syrians and Warriors and Amazons
that cut their breast to better aim,
you wake up at this particular time
at the end of our millennium
and tell us that everything is gone,
the Syrians, the Warriors, the drinkers from the sculls.
What remains is still you. The unchangeable,
the feminine, the healer, the inner beauty.
Your face
computer-generated Caucasian
or native Mongolian
lost.

Geronimo

Sift soil to reveal secrets
buried from your eternity.
They say you are important for us,
you little mountaineer.
They say you are important to us,
you old shepherd,
lost in the blizzard to a deadly sleep,
sleep while walking,
walking to the end.

Your mind so sophisticated,
gently dissolved by the fog,
that cut your way back.
You are important to us,
you little mountaineer,
for your light-weight knap-sack
made of twigs and skin,
your arrows and arrow case
first time found together,
your ax melted
from grounded silica stone,
its arsenic vapors
poisoning you slowly,
first found together with tools
and parts that made you
independent
as you needed to be
on the mountains.

Did you know how to count
as we would, how to count the
many kinds of wood you carried
one for each need, the best?
The two dried mushrooms
of antibiotic slow release
hanging from your pouch
by your nail marks revealed
your recurrent suffering

from arsenic poisoning
or a handful of broken ribs
that never healed
when things crushed
all together to the end.

September

September, twenty-first

Hot sleeveless dress clings to my skinny body.
Grade nine new school new girls new alphabet,
Αλφα Βετα γαμμα δελτα.
Declined articles cling to nouns. Too much.
Eleven years old I want to play to have fun.
My eyes starve for anything to understand.
I hide them under eyelashes as much as I can
so people will not know what I think and what I see.

September, twenty-second

With Francesco out of school every day
we wait in the empty coach until the train slides at two thirty
with crescendo ta-tam noise rocking heads and empty stomachs.
At each station the scream of lemon-crushed-ice makes our thirst
grow more.

Casteldaccia is one slow sweating mile up the hill
our lucky autumn season in Grandmother's house.
Smell of orchard's fruit drying in lemon twine baskets
jasmine perfume. Rays of sun play with dust on the checkered
tiles.

September, twenty-third

On the train.
I hate homework. I just do nothing.
Look outside. Look at every possible thing
in the deserted station where nothing moves
not even the two stray dogs that lay flat
as flat they can be on the concrete sidewalk
and stare still at the glittering railroad track.
Sudden sun rays hit the train parked across on track six.
Men clean coach inside, drag carts with tired moves.
In this lazy hour I read anything I can.
on the face of the carriage parked across.

Messina Seconda classe Vagone letto right to the small
writing white on orange-brown.

September, twenty-sixth

Something happened two days ago.
Something happened.
Something.
I haven't told Mom. She would not understand.
She would blame me, even tell Dad
and make a mess. No way I want that.
For three days
I have tried not to think but I do,
even when I close my eyes on the pillow
and I hear everybody sleeping in the house.
Terrible dreams make me jump up awake,
sweating, no rest. I still see it all. Away from the other men
away to the next carriage, he sits down unwraps things his lunch
maybe I think.
I know I shouldn't look. But I do. He moves fighting something
in his hands.
Suddenly jumps up from the seat. Pulls down his pants quick.
Forget to hide my eyes, invisible far away in the shadow of the
carriage
all different and hot and wet heart beating crazy. But I still do. I
look.
I look in the middle of his frantic agitation, than in a moment he
turns his head
our eyes meet, no escape, confrontation, fear. I know before he
does.
I know before he comes. I stare blind at the train parked on track
six.
My eyes in flame still see him through the lashes,
dress again, walk slowly through the carriage
through the door down the steps across the tracks.
Heavy metal ladder sound clunks close
thump steps on the hallway floor
black shadow heavy breathing
at our compartment door.
Gets in.

Sits down.
Please God help me look
as ugly as ugly as ugly as I can be.
If I don’t look left across the compartment
his shadow will drag him away. I know it can happen.
It happens now. *How much homework for tomorrow* I turn to Francesco
Not much his blunt face has seen nothing, not even the words white on orange-brown.

Life Path

Prisons of our life grasping for air
grasping for light to read the number
assigned, born to the cell,
punishment or not. Number the numbers
of our destiny that follow us by the day,
life path in the darkness of our prison.

Prison

It has air and light and visitors, the cell of the pink
piglet fattened with oak seeds and water.
The children call in and poke skin, with love.
The children from the roof grassed with barley, one poppy at the corner.

6:00 a.m., piglet. A deep brass pot filled with foamy warm blood.
The prison is no more. Barley dried up scattered with its soil.
The barn dismantled flat on the ground.
Life somewhere else.

Abandoned

Where are you now, Mom,
my green field,
my yellow flowering hay,
you promised me with kisses
you would not abandon me.

Do you know how
my hands
tied up in a white fist
longed for the sound of your voice?
For three months you held me,
for three months
you locked your eyes into mine.
Are you still alive?
I pretend not to care.

My skin still remembers
your lips
buried under
a million other kisses,
your hands
melted into my skin, buried
under a million other caresses.
My eyes have engraved your
eyes into bones.

How could you live away from me,
from the fragrance
of my smile? How could you
run away like if I was a
barking dog,
run away
not to be bitten,
to forget, to forget,
to forget what love had done.
My whole life
I have tried
to forgive.

Six months it took to
open my white fists
after you were gone.
New eyes, new hands, new kisses.
Not yours, not yours any more.
Not yours.

Anxiety

Dribbling, over, non stop
anxiety repletion accrued
fear to come and go, no
response. Questioning why
answer. No answer.

No possible answer.
Cruelty in the brain
well set, engraved
testicles set in, blocked
for ever. Non stop.
anxiety, that's not the
proper word. Wanting
to cry over the mountains.

Who sets the alarm. Non stop.
The alarm to start, the
alarm to end. The heart
to beat faster descent.
Go back to your sleep
you beggar for love.

Transients won't give,
To find their way. A way
to digest the intrusion of

the day. The phone rings,
Alarm to hell. I am not. I don’t
Want. They said ok,
That’s the way you
Are these days, they say.

No, you were born
on top of the mountain.
The ridge for the wind
to spread the seed,
the Normans to start
their own power trip.

Oh, yes the culture,
The jumping gets loose,
try ever to go back, no no
not more.

Hypnosis

Go back, Maria
Turn another page.
And another page.
Go back all the way
To the very beginning
of the book.

What do you see?
"I see four walls,
the walls of my stroller,
very close. I lay flat
between four walls
face up."
"Anybody that you trust?"
"I see the blue of the sky,
the green of the pine tree.

I hear the cicadas hiding
forever under the pine needles.
I feel the hand of nonna Caterina,
tender, loving, caressing my hair.

I feel her presence so good,
Oh, so good
under the pine tree
In Casteldaccia."

Mom and Me

Curtain dirt soil roots origin go back to understand what is universal, what day we change the essence of things, what is our purpose in our life. What counts for me. Love is the answer, to look at you and take you the way you are, not wanting to control you, not wanting to change you. It is acceptance, it is licking it, it is me becoming you and me still remaining me and you remaining you. It is cutting out time, time that changes things, time that puts an end to things, time that nullifies eternity where I want to be with you. Time that puts an end to things and leaves you with a bitter mouth. A mouth full of desire, a heart longing, a mind searching, and not finding. Hands stretched, grouping nothing, because the air has been emptied of your presence. Stay with me a bit more, just a little, so I can tell you what I still haven't told you, because time took you away, and I didn't know how to get out of it, how to live without, how to make seconds last a whole life, how to say Mom I love you for this eternity.

Treasure hidden not knowing where to be discovered, to be down under the sand next to the sea, where the sea weeds roll back and forth to the wind and roll back in the salty water, my foot carefully searching for hidden sea urchins, waiting to prick my feet, mom, oh they hurt, and the sun, hot and burning on the sand under the dried curled up sea weeds. Come with me, come to the soft breeze hiding the *patelle* under the sand under the curled up dried sea weeds come and dig them with me, as you have never done before. Come now with me.

not goodbye
not with me
you may not
know, not yet
how free you are.
To walk over
in the air, over
the desk, the way the road
in the garden, like a bird,
in the wings, come, come
with me, don't

leave me alone
help me with
this longing,
this longing for you,
that time can
not heal

What's the use of telling the story, other than pulling it out of my chest, to be able to breathe again freely, that open my lungs stretched to the point I forget I breathe.
So it is not true I
wait
for others
to share
with my kids.
It is not true
I do it to survive
to allow air
in my lungs
to allow blood in my veins, to get up and eat a pomegranate.
Do you remember a pomegranate, the seeds on the spoon. So this is a change I wasn't expecting so I wasn't expecting I would start doing things for me—for me and you as I have never done before. As we have never done.

You told me the daughter carries the mother's fears, the mother's inability to relate, the mother's fear of touching and what's the use of kissing, of telling the story from generation to generation, other than pull it out from my chest until something changed, to be able to breath again freely it's my problem and from that open my lungs that stretch to the point of rupture. I forget I breathe. So it is not true I learned, on both sides, I say things will never be the same.

I see a photograph taken three years ago of Sasà kissing you. In it, you close your eyes in terror. "But I am your nephew," he laughed. He is touching you and that scares you so much that you have to close your eyes, laughing and screaming. "No, bah!" He touches your hair. You never allow anybody to touch your hair. "Can you massage my legs, mom?" I would ask at times. "Can

you massage my neck?" I would beg. You do it. This is the only caress you allow yourself to give, out from your monastic rules. Do you remember Papirio? Do you remember the Abbott? Is the Abbott's descendant living in you now and ruling your life? You have not learned, in a thousand years, to live an earthly life, you have not learned to kiss and touch and get your hands dirty even in body fluids, yes I imagine, and I get angry at you, angry and in pain because I needed to be touched, to be touched by you, more than you can imagine, I needed to be kissed, more than you were able to. And I needed to touch you, to feel the warmth of your skin, the smoothness of your hands, the softness of your hair, the roundness of your body, inside my arms.

I came three years ago, or was it four? And found you had not changed your bed linens for months, you thought you could live without other people's help. You were wearing two nylons, one over the other, forgetting you were already wearing one; and when I peeled them off (you allowed me to do that), your legs' skin was a crust, a crust from the top to the bottom of your legs—a crust, I thought, horrified and angry, because you did not allow other people to touch you. I touched it with repulsion and unexpectedly it crumbled away in soapy water, as I slid my finger on new pink-white baby skin along your legs. My first caress, you didn't call it caress, you called pedicure.

When I arrive this time, the Sister says, "You know, it's incredible. We told her you were arriving; she was so happy. She got up, the first time in days, dressed up and came into the living room, all new energy. And there she is." Tiny, elegant, as usual sitting alone, away from the old women, not close enough to risk being *sfiorata*, brushed accidentally. Separation.

"We are going now, Mom," I say. She gets up with a smile, says good-bye to everyone, happy and proud that I'm there, trusting me as her goddess, her hand on my arm, the cane with the silver monogram in the other hand, slowly she exits the room on her feet; what a diva she is, I think.

The ambulance people wait for her downstairs. They try to lift her up. Ah! How do they dare to touch her! She yells. They, two

big young men, look at the tiny woman, then look at each other and try again. She screams again. They win.

At the Hospital, the Emergency room is rough; through doors kept wide open, people go in and out indifferently—the ambulance drivers, the *portantieri*, the male nurses, the doctors. She lays on a stretcher, half undressed, with a small linen barely covering her private parts. “Do I have to stay so exposed?” she asks softly, “under the eyes of all these people?” She looks even more lost and tiny. I say “Yes, mom, but don’t worry, no one cares about it.” An old little woman becomes almost invisible, really, almost invisible even when she has to keep her 90 years old privates exposed.

Up in Gynaecology she is the centre of attention, of course. Oh yeah! It takes two nurses and her nephew, the surgeon, to get her undressed into a hospital gown. Her golden chain belt, her necklace, her rings, all neatly folded away with her clothes. Two nurses it takes, and a nephew-surgeon to touch her bare skin. Violence, it is violence, dear, to touch your sacred skin. Sorry, I get angry again.

“Little granny is praying,” says the woman from the next bed, but your prayers roll over and over, like a broken record. I help you. At the sign of the Cross, like our kids at night, when they were learning to pray, you bow your head and close your eyes, and then repeat the sign of the cross, almost as not trusting my ability to recommend you to God. I smile and say the prayer for you, the same prayer as you once were saying for me.

I prepare you food. You cannot eat hospital stuff no more. I bring ice creams, I bring desserts and trick you with bouillon sipped out from a juice straw. I bring you the last broad beans from your garden. You just eat one bean and no more. I bring you *nespole* from the tree in your garden. You eat two. I bring you a jasmine flower, its scent to soothe your pain.

As days passed, I helped you getting up, walk a bit and then sit on a chair, with more and more effort I watched you battling for life and for dignity, your precious jewel. Then, one day they took

you downstairs, and you had to drink a grey-green liquid, so they could see what you had in your guts. “Do I have to drink all of it?” you asked your nephew-surgeon. “Yes,” he replied. .” “But really all of it?” “Yes, really all of it.” You drank it all, religiously. Jesus asking his Father the same question and receiving the same answer. Brave mom, it did not matter. I had arrived and that seemed to be all it counted for you; me sleeping on the floor, next to your bed; me sleeping on three plastic-laminate chairs, next to your side. I haven’t slept on a bed for days and I snore, because I’m tired, a sweet sound for your ears, not for your roommates, of course. And you smile, looking at me, when I open my eyes, “I question if this is the right thing for you to do. Why are you down on the floor? Why aren’t you sleeping in a bed?” “Mom, this is a hospital. Beds are for patients only, like you.” “Why am I a patient? What’s wrong with me?” “This is why we are here, mom, so doctors will find out what’s wrong with you.” “Do doctors know?” “No, they don’t.” It’s a lie, but I put all my energy in saying it. “What is happening to me, now? I don’t seem to be able to hold, I think I dirtied myself,” you said with a dismayed expression. “Don’t worry, Mom. It’s only that green-grey liquid you drank this morning that makes you sick. It’ll last only for a few days.” I help you getting up. I help you to the bathroom. I undo your pad and stare frozen. “Do you have to do this…?” I hear your voice questioning with concern. “Don’t worry, Mom. I’m okay” I say slowly, and suddenly I really feel okay. I take a deep breath, while you stand still, exposed. I wipe your bum. I’m wiping your bum, Mom, as you did mine, at one time. I stare at myself in the bathroom mirror, to take a deep breath. Suddenly a line of blood runs down your leg to the heel, too quickly for me to catch it up. I wipe your blood at the front of your leg. I’m doing this. I’m really doing this. I stare at myself again in the bathroom mirror. I’m even seeing you naked, almost destroyed, terribly in pain, and yet I feel a sort of incredible joy for both of us, almost a pleasure in being here, in witnessing these hours of your life, in serving you, hoping to be accepted.

Now it becomes impossible for you to get up. “Is your leg still swollen?” I ask you in the morning. “Did the nurse give you any medicine for it?” “Oh, no. I’m not fit for medicines, yet.” “I see, mom!” I reply. Then I quietly start massaging your foot, through

the blankets, through the linen. I slowly get up the ankle, the calf, the knee. “Gentle, gentle, not so violent. You are so rough. The massage has to be very light...” “... like a caress,” I say. “Yes, like a caress.” Are you by chance going to teach me a new type of massage? I hold your hand. “Mom, I love you.” You stay still for a moment, then twist your wrist and escape from my cupped hands. “Your hands are rough and hot, they scratch my skin.” “Oh, Mom, why does it still matter so much to you now? Mom, I’m not going to leave you any more, for good.” I massage you through the linens, with more and more pressure, “*Piano, piano.* Not so hard. Be gentle, gentle. You are so rough,” and I know you have reached your limits.

Then it is time to leave the hospital, to move to a new home, as she needs more care. I go to the old home to pick up fresh clothes, the embroidered silk shirt, the chenille jacket. The golden chain belt she doesn’t want any more. She doesn’t care. My heart tightens. The sister at the old home says, “Why driving so much, tonight? You could stay here and sleep tonight in your mom’s bed,” and she offers a mozzarella cheese and an orange for supper. The blankets are cold. I do not undress. I slide between the linens with my stockings, my shirt, my everything, so my skin wouldn’t touch the linens, except for my hands and my face skin. I turn slowly, trying not to release the scent that permeates them, a mix of baby powder, creamed soap, some medicinal herbs, and her own skin odour. It feels like sliding back into a stinky, almost cold, placenta. And finally I get to sleep inside there.

In the new home, out from the hospital, things change quickly. Semolina pudding is too coarse for her tongue I bring anything for her to eat, even chocolates, just one a day or homemade minestrone made with ten vegetables, one spoon, maybe two per meal. I bring six *nespole* and sit down in front of her with a plate and a knife. She watches me peal the golden skin of the first one, and split the white pulp open, taking the brown shinny bone out, and with dripping fingers bring a section of white juicy pulp to her lips. She closes her eyes, and slowly, slowly eats. When she finishes, opens her eyes and that is the signal for more, until she gets lost in the battle and can’t open her eyes rolled up, anymore. So now with my fingers I touch her lips and she opens her mouth,

as coming back from a dream.

I ask: “Do you want a massage?” Your white head rests on the armchair turquoise cushion. You try to open your eyes with no avail. With a whisper you say: “Gentle, gentle.” I massage you from your feet up, up to your shoulders, to your head, to the pressure points in your head. What do I want, what am I looking for, by pressing down the centre of your head, the orbit around your eyes, the side of your nose? I feel I’m giving you life, you do not complain. I take your hand into mine, I love you, I mean. A sudden twist of your wrist brings me back to your reality. With no voice your lips sign, “Hot, hot.” I release your hand onto your laps, you old Lilli cat, I think, no strength to move and you still want to scratch me. I love you any way.

I bring you the image of the Holy Mary of the Tears from Siracuse, with a little blessed cotton wool in an envelope I explain what it is. You take it, in your hands. Than the image disappears. I look for it all over, under the cushion, on the floor, and finally I ask you about it. “Inside, it’s inside,” you whisper. “Inside what?” I ask. And with your last hand gesture, little heavy, you point at the inside of your shirt.
Today you are not talking. Cannot open your eyes. I brought a twig of lemon verbena. I pin it onto your nightgown. Mom, can you hear me? Mom, don’t go yet. Wait until I come back. I have to go home now, finish preparing the house for you. I’ll take you there, the last time. You’ll see your lemon trees, the prickly pears, the oleanders in full bloom now. I still have to sweep the deck. Your cerulean dress with white flowers is neatly hanging for you on top of the stairs. I still have to wash your shoes, hope they’ll dry up on time, right Mom? You’ll wait for that, please, tell me you will. All the arrangements are made. A cushion of pink roses on your wooden box, six people to carry you from the house to the church, by shoulder, as it was for your people century after century, to the church they built. At the exit from the church, the bells will cry heavily for you, the last of the old generation, as you always say, and they will take you around the town square, past your fathers’ tower, past the little church where, until after the war, the peasants spent the night in prayer, *vegliando*, watching nonno Peppino or zio Totò that had just

died; past via Lungarini, stretched down towards the sea, blue, a triangular shape down the hill; the men in the square will turn slowly their heads like sunflowers, holding the hats in their hands, in sign of respect at the passing of your passing, slowly down to the narrow winding road to the Cemetery.

I call the priest for the last blessings. I hold your hand and tell you what is happening. Your hand is warm, humid and still, it does not respond to my pressure. Mom, don't go now. Wait for me. Your hand rests in my hand. Strange, strange, I think. You are accepting me holding your hand. And then, while the priest is still saying the prayers, I feel your hand twitching almost imperceptibly in my hand, and your wrist twists, just a bit, a little bit, but enough for me to feel it. I look at you, your eyes closed, your lips still, not a muscle moving. And I smile, you old cat. Ok, you win. I put your hand on the linen. The priest has just left now. Pretty soon I'll have to leave too, I know you would want me to finish what I have started at home. I'll give you a massage before I leave, I think. Start from your feet as usual. You do not react. Come on, Mom, give me a movement, as you just did, a movement to tell me how you feel. I press hard and harder and harder and harder my hand on your toes, on your heels, on your ankles, on your calf, harder and harder, on your knee, on your thighs. I move to your head, look for the pressure points. Don't go, mom. Please wait for me. Just give me time to finish my work for you, to make the house perfect for when you come, the way you would want it.

I drive back to the town. At the last bend of the highway, "Stop, stop here," you say, "look how beautiful this is. Take a photo from here." The town lays at the feet of the hill, "Look. I haven't seen it so beautiful in years. Take photo, and from here too, and more and more. Don't stop. They'll stay with you, with this moment." On the way back to the home in the city, you ask me to stop at the ice cream shop, and ask me to buy a slice of ricotta cake and a bun with whipped cream, like the one Dad was used to buy me. I get out in the sun, with this memory on my hand, and walk in front of the sea, quiet and blue, back to the car. "Now eat it quickly, while you are driving, before it's too late." A bite of crust and sweet ricotta and chocolate. It's so good. A mouth full.

I’m two blocks away from the home. My cell rings. My mouth is full of sweet ricotta and chocolate. I answer.

“Why didn’t you wait? Why didn’t you wait for me?” I kiss you. I embrace your head with my arm, caress your hair, and kiss you all over your face. I touch your head, still warm. “Are you sure?” I ask the nurse, “Yes, I’m sure."

If I want you back home, we have to move quickly and in secret. We have to extend your life by a few hours, so it will end it in a different place. The men arrive, big the first one, huffing and puffing, skinny the second. I hear them, “This is out of question, a minimum dignity... here is her daughter, ask her...” “We forgot the stretcher,” says the big one, “We could take her in a wheelchair down the elevator...” “Or?” “Or we can take her down the stairs in her bed sheet.” Ei, Mom, this is going to be fun. This is really far out, I think. “Okay,” I say. Like you had been murdered, a dead body, scrunched in a bed linen, down four long flights of stairs. I’m amazed, morn. This is your first act in your new life, and I’m really amazed. You mean you are already standing above dignity? You mean you can already laugh about this? I look at the guys sweating down the steep steps, “It’s ok to put her down for a minute on the next landing. Better to rest, than dropping her down the steps.”

I hear you laughing, or is it me?

Lemons

Lemon Sunkist 4 05 3 USA
I pick up a lemon
touch its yellow skin
the round smell in my hand
skin pores bursting citrus scent
its tangy juice on my tongue
quenching my thirst

It was
It was my happiness

Memory of war black carob sugar
milk powder sweet potatoes

Memory of peace
so different
new *am-lire*
new *Primus* stinking kerosene stove
you carrying in your box a bergamot citrus
its scent closing for us an era in Calabria
new lemon citrus scent
new era opened for us in Sicily

promise of peace
a dream of peace

Orchard past orchard
rolling hills of tender green leaves
black bare tree trunks of lemon trees
scent of star-like lemon flower
záhara ‘splendour of the white’

Back home after War ending
off the train
up the unpaved *Fossáto* red soil road
pass *Vignicélli* lemon orchard
over yellow clusters of clover spreading
from *conca* to *conca*
water lock to water lock

> why did you think life was more beautiful elsewhere
> tell me

Down
down the red soil
running down the sloping path
among olive groves and lemon trees
skipping pebbles
down *sailbe* terraced hills
playing Indians with bow and arrow
made of olive and lemon twigs

where are you now
where are you police chief
chasing me
bandit

Slices of lemon dipped in sugar
to tame lemon juice crispy flavour
stolen away from grandma Caterina's orchard

how could
how could you think
your life was more sour than lemon juice

I kept your table as you left it
but put the two drawers so they face the wall
so that no one will shard your letters
your photos
your sling made with lemon wood
and the bergamot dried-up shrunken like stone in the box
you made with folded paper

Every year when I return I place it in my hands
the red citrus pigment gone
what you left me with

dried bergamot
dried happiness

I take it my hands under the sun
sprinkle it with scented lemon oil
to anoint you before I leave
again

2. Voices

Games

Where is God I asked Mom
when I was five. *Up in the sky and all*
over she vaguely said.
So I spent days with
Francesco in August
looking up to the sky
between the clouds,
when we were walking
in the early evening
down the road
to the public gardens,
until daylight got
dimmer and it was
difficult to see tree
shapes against the sky.

If we can see Him
what will He look like
this was our evening game
a bright light
a blue eye
a cloudy hand.
Are we going to
get scared
or will He be
gentleness and love.

The sky is black now
I want to run fast
Francesco said
as fast as I can
and that
was another game.

Solitude for Mom

I never thought I would desire
to stay so close to you as now that I fear
you may be gone this very moment.
so far we are.

I see you sitting on the chair,
a ray of son filtering through
the green shutters half closed,
a magic dance of photographs
on the mirrored chest of drawers
in your bedroom of Via Nigra.

I see a smile on your face,
the silence broken in the room,
your hands searching for the music box
Sasu bilt in eighty four.

I see a smile on your face,
“in the name of ther Father,
the Son, the Holy Spirit…”
twenty-seven more days to go
until I come.

Oleander

Under the shade of
the wild pine tree
the oleander is not blooming
in the last two weeks of July
when I take care
of Uncle Peppino's garden
in my old town of Casteldaccia.

I talk to its leaves, the dusty
branches crying out for thirst, pour
fresh water over its buds,
beg for a flower to open for me.

Until one morning at the very
top of the tree the one bud
becomes magenta petals and, deep
inside, yellow and green pistils.

I greet it with a smile
and it opens some more.
Our silent relation a few days
long lasting until
my cousins are back in town.

I stop breathing today
when I return to the garden.
The oleander was not blooming
as it should in this season.
The tree cut to its roots
lays on its side, the wilted
flower stretched to the soil.

Fire

I remember Grandmother Caterina's
golden lemon orchards,
star-shaped white
scented orange blossoms,
silver leaves of olive trees
Grandfather had planted
now grown up tall to reach
very high the sea breeze
crossing the valley
between Casteldaccia and Altavilla.

All this I remember
that is gone
burned to destruction,
my childhood paradise
wiped out by an act of violence.
Silent impotence to witness
abandoned orchards
dried up skeletal trees
burned by vandals
with a cigarette butt.

Love

Your voice reaches me from much distance.
I try to answer but I only smile quietly
for fear of your laughter.
How can I tell you of the energy that moves
reaches and spreads to my darkest folds.
Spaces I see now in light because of you.
I don't understand my whole life
resting now in the eye of an hurricane.

Airport

Brown shoes, high heels,
your light dress with pink flowers.
You look still the same,
I think.
Your legs move slowly
one tiny step after the other,
the shoes dragging
on the black rubber dots
of the airport floor.
Oh, my God
you are so small.
I am afraid, I want to go back:
go back to where I came from,
where there are no mothers
alone
mothers who need to get ready
to die
mothers who have been abandoned
by their daughters,
because life seems more beautiful
away in places where there is freedom:
and forests and raccoons and
black bears crossing the logging roads,
when we go camping up high on
the mountains
and nothing moves for miles
where we are, except
a bird lamenting in the night
and I get scared but the
dog does not move and that
means we are safe, around the fire,
because if somebody
wants to kill us they can do it
and no one will ever know
for weeks, maybe for months, and then
they will find us.

I walk slowly.
How can your face
be so tiny?
Your eyes have lost their shine.
Where are you going to die?
In the street killed by a kid
snatching your purse
or in your bed
and your body will not know,
your mind will not know
until your soul has left
the room
and will be free finally to move
anywhere it wants.

Let's sit here and be quiet
while my luggage
is cleared at customs.

Parachute

Don't let me hold you so tight
that you may not want to leave when you come back
you
baby in the laundry tub
you
little feet harassed by tiny waves at the beach of *Cefalu'*
you
baby on the cobble stone of *Tonnara di Scopello*
dressed up by the Sicilian sun.
God save the girls when he grows up, the lady screamed
twenty five years ago looking at you
under Woodwards overpass.

Ceiling of your room your army parachute I'm saving
for when you come back.
I'm not a kid any more, Mom.
I'm not coming back this is what you mean,
I fear.
You the 24-hour-light-basement-tomato expert grower,
you the builder of titanium bikes
and steel tools for clay that opened
your way to New York.

I'm not a kid any more, Mom.
Yes, Sasa, don't let you-baby die
as when you wanted to
run away to steal
dynamite from Whistler Mountain
and biked straight down from Blackomb
glacier after I threw on the porch all your bike
parts scattered away from Persian carpets.
Yes, Sasa, don't let you-baby die,
ceiling of your room your army parachute
I'll save
for when you come back.

Spring at Trout Lake

(Maybe we can wait)
Crows crowing
a dog loquacious
a man coughs
a drummer, drumming. I don't see
his face.
A bus rattles far away in the city noise.
(maybe we can wait)
a curtain of houses
silently watches me
touring the lake. Oh! Their tidy
eyelashes!
(Maybe we can wait) a woman jogs alone.
A man with his puppy who
doesn't want to walk anymore.
Ezekiel, like the Prophet.
The man
picks him up
in his arms. Eleven and a half weeks old
white long hair, a Jack
Russell.
A crow high above my
head crows insistently
calling
a mate.
An airplane flies higher above the sky.
(No bombing for us in Canada, of course!)

(maybe we can wait maybe we can let you live a little longer).
Two drummers on the platform over the water.
(Tomorrow, tomorrow we'll say goodbye)
beautiful, a girl stretches
her arms to the sky
pre-announcing spring
she laughs
leaning over a mossy wrinkled
trunk of a weeping willow
barely awaking with

its slender
new branches stretched
low on the ground with
little buds tenderly
swinging
soundlessly in the
green breeze.
Pippo no more strains himself
his heart pounding
his breathing heavy
to his last walk around the lake in the park.
Dreaming to chase quarrelling
ducks, well into the
centre of the lake.
(not for Pippo, tomorrow, not for Pippo).
At the distance sitting on a
stump right over the
edge, a girl in azure hat
and scarf
counter-dances the drumming with her
flute, the water waving
her delicate sound across the lake
back to the drummers.
It's spring at Trout Lake.
(Your time, Pippo
to remember
the birds and the squirrels,
remember the water
and the ducks and the lilies
my goodbye to you, Pippo).
Back to the car, quietly, I caress him.
The air swelled with
Mozart's first movement three pianos
concerto number three.

Arturina

I was in Palermo when it all happened
A stupid car accident at two twenty a.m. Canada time
Nobody on the road
on that early September morning of seventy three
grade one first day of school
for Stefano tomorrow
Cristina quite a baby
This what you saw at that moment
I think you did
Last thought for Franco with a long silence
Nothing moving on the road except another car
suddenly
taking off from a driveway
The only sprinkler pole
for miles on the grass
there for you
no words no blood no good-bye
It was your style

Milan
Smog
Fog
Sky
Birds
Emigration
Escape
Flying to Canada to Franco
You told *them* you were going visiting a friend
You never went back home

I remember your small elegant figure
impeccable straight blonde hair
hot red lipstick
fair eyes.
I like the fog
I like the smog
I liked to breathe the gas behind the buses
I miss that of Milan.

We laugh but you are serious
You really mean it
We admire you for this
You like what you like
and you stick to it

What made you run away from safe life
to become a settler in the West
you so elegant and feminine
you from the heart of Italy
Bye mom you did not say
You stubborn in your heart to fly to Canada

We played Ouija board
in you kitchen all of us leaning over the island
asking the *spirits*
which of us would become richer
would have more success
Young and beautiful and full of joy
All bound by the same destiny
Not tourists but travelers
If you are a traveler you leave
nothing behind
Home is where you are
Anything can happen and you may
never go back
The book had not been written
but we were living in it
under the same sheltering sky
We had left Italy each to come here
each to follow our star to the West
bonds stronger than family
Chimera's
call impossible to resist
destiny made with our hands
where the future was all to be set
and love sung sweetest songs
to adventure discovery freedom
Family bonds loosened
severed one side or the other

Pain buried deep in a dark
shadow of soul
and a smile for the new life
a new language
the abandoned maiden name
And in the morning
early in the morning
right before awaking
an unbearable longing for the people
that we had not seen for a long time
not knowing if because
were they dead
or because ‘we had left them behind
Every morning a check list for them
just one minute before the mind
awakened
threw the unconscious back
in the shadow.
We were not left free
even when going back to visit
nonna Concetta *zio* Peppino or *zia* Fina
Each in their own time
cried in their softest voice
with eyes screaming the truth
this is the last time we see each other
And that was true but too painful
or scary to stay with
A smile threw
a blaze of light
and the prophecy vanished
until its time came true
This was my experience
Arturina
but I know it was also yours

That night we ask the board how many children
each of us will have
Arturina two Franco five
We laugh
You don’t

Tell Arturina to be careful…
You scream *No!* we take our hands off the saucer with a quick good-bye
You run down the stairs to the basement *Stop! Stop!* almost crying
That was the last time we played the game
It was in Quilchena
You kept that in your heart as we did
The new Alfa had a word written with white chalk
on the passenger window
It meant dead battery
It read *Dead*
on your side

We moved away and came visiting you
Listened to Stefano's conquering a slow slow violin
not made of cardboard but a real one
a winning smile floating on freckles and brass hair
I don't know where she came from
so stubborn and self assured
You laugh at Cristina and mirror yourself in her

Then one day
at the end of summer seventy three
I was crossing Piazza Massimo in Palermo
rushing to finish my shopping
It was a hot bright full summer day
before the stores closed for the siesta
the day before I returned to Canada
That day I saw you walking towards me
You looked in my eyes
a long glance intense
But you didn't smile
I opened my mouth to welcome you but didn't say a thing
You walked right beside me in the middle of the square
We both kept eyes on eyes turning our heads slowing down
Then
when you were sure I had recognized you
you turned your head and walked away
It was two twenty a.m. Canada time

It was good to be back to Canada
Desire of intimacy
togetherness on the black leather sofa under the window
I'm so happy you are back with kisses and tenderness
Then a long silence broken by three words
Arturina is dead

Guts
fired
away
miles
into
nothingness

3. Per Francesca

Dream

I want to be alone while I say good-bye to you now.
I saw you, my baby, in a room this morning before I woke up.
That room the size of a gym all empty, dark, silent,
one door closed behind me. You alone in white light standing
in front of another door closed at the far opposite end.
A prison parlor, but whose prison
I don't know if yours or mine. I don't know.
Just air between us. Just air. This is new for me.
The first time I see you through air.
First time I see you.
I know you came here to say good-bye.
I know you won't be back.

We were going to experience
life and love together. But
you went ahead where
I could not follow,
you went alone, my baby.
In frozen terror I watched you.
You went alone.

Nine to Five

I wish
I could only remember to forget what I did wrong.

When I talked you listened in symbiosis
stronger your mind growing beautiful avid never alone.
But no. That was not enough. No consideration for you.
I did not allow quiet experience, nurturing peace.
I dragged you instead in a nine to five business world.
Sitting down the whole day. No freedom: Like a prisoner.
Two women in a prisoner's room. The only two women in the room. Women.
Men laughed *we'll rearrange drafting boards*
to allow you to walk by, so big we were.
A window to the south, the world outside
was good for you to bathe in sunlight.
I worked: you got tired and slept
but more and more you called
come come come sleep with me.

Home turned into a construction site by day.
Open to the sky, the bed in the middle of the room, we both
awaken in the morning to the blasting:
skill-saw cutting walls into pieces. I remember
carefully taking you down to the kitchen
through the new stairs not yet built, just 2x4
steps held together by a nail on each end.
Please don 't come now, my baby, please
there is no safe place for you ready here now.
You did not come.

Freezers

They wouldn't hire a pregnant woman to design a hospital lab.
How can she be efficient in a man's business world.
It started in November when we needed money.
You can show them, you can my pride told me.
and I laughed with you hiding under my coat.
I was wrong. I didn't know that grass in the park had in vain
welcomed you with periwinkle white and yellow clusters,
the breeze carried out the flavor of French fries and hot dogs
you never tasted.

The hospital site visit was too good, I thought.
Prisoner of choices, stop here. You and me and all the men
behind the morgue's closed door make jokes of fear
no parts are left behind on the table.
A little blood no need to come in if you don't feel like it.
Work like a men, no difference. I was wrong not trusting
intuition, No *Mom don 't take me in there please, no*, you said but
I did not listen. I could not listen. It was important to be like men
to work like men. No difference. I was wrong, deadly wrong. I
entered the room you screamed through my veins *not here*
please, *mom* and cried. It was too late.

Lab Life

The first spelling you learned was of big words
haemoglobin histology serum.
You kept me company and with my eyes
walked through the lab drawings
many times a day for nine months,
for nine months the length of your life,
learned all there was to be learned.
When things went wrong at the end
you knew your way
went ahead of the nurses to the freezer,
opened the door for them.
That same freezer storing the blood
that saved my life
not yours.
When you were taken to the cold room you did not cry
brave girl, not this time.
You knew the place.

Bing Cherries

The first cherries of the season
I bought for you at Safeway
that Saturday afternoon
on the way to the hospital,
your first cherries I thought.
I talked to you
but you did not answer
you did not move.
In terror
I watched
you abandon me.

Goodbye Francesca

The wind takes us behind the slanting blades
of the slender reeds planted in a cluster
near the wall
where prickly pear
grow red and juicy in Casteldaccia

Now moving freely
through the castle on the rock
and the narrow passageways of *Sperlinga*
we laugh at the triangular cave engravings
carved to drain rain water away
from the top of the low doorway
in the cave inhabited by locals
by choice or as tourist attraction
in a strange sort of mysterious spell

By the burning red sunset stars
of Matmata searching
for Luke Skywalker
where three thousand Berbers
live underground in sandstone
dug into crude steps
and rooms and alcoves
to escape the heat of the sun

Down to the *Spasimo* city church
never roofed
for the final note of a concert under the black sky
I but still too far away

Sometimes I see
a moment is given
to a mother
a moment given
out of her whole life
for to touch
to caress her child
just for a moment

For to kiss
her still baby
just born

But if in that single moment
she lacks the courage
she forfeits her chance
to transform that
into a moment as long as her life

A mother who prefers
not to see her child's face
thus
lives out her life
as if nothing has happened
as if the missed kisses
as if the caresses missed
would not haunt her every day
with every breath
every thought that comes
back into her mind

4. Close Up

Bus Stop

In a humid wet gray day at the bus stop on Fraser and Main
I feel good sitting on the wooden bench
among people away from the rain

At the corner of the lane under the rain
a young girl kisses her prince who does not move,
band on his forehead under the raincoat hood,
hands in his pockets, no expression.

A kid dances singing on his feet, leans
back on his mom's body:
red toe nails glow out from summer shoes,
her sad eyes far away,
what does she see I cannot tell,
a violent husband, a jobless man, an older mother still
or simply her endless solitude.
They are together but she is in her own world.

An older woman with blue-gray tights
shows the fat rings on her buttocks,
a sweet three year old girl at her smile
jumps in her open arms from the wooden bench
the white polka-dots of her strawberry
plastic raincoat parachute over her purple boots.

Line Up

Three long hours at the College
staring through the window
over the heads of students smoking at the gray
Vancouver watercolor light that only
Tony Onley painted in his golden days..

Damp gray air smelling of soil and wet grass
and moss and bark and escape desire dreaming
to be in the forest camping next to the fire
with you and the dog wiggling his tail
to the sparks and pancakes on the Coleman stove.

Blindfolded

I turn the light on-off-on.
Is it on? Maybe not.
No way to check. What if it is not?
How can I move
not bumping my face against the wall
if the light is not on?
What if the Spirits that love darkness
and like to dance wildly
start laughing about me
blindfolded in my bathroom,
going around thinking that I'm safe from them,
just because the light is on and instead it is not
but I don't know it and so they can have fun
and jump in front of my face secretly moving the air
just an inch away from my nose
and silently laugh,
then jump aside almost touching my ears,
almost tickling but not quite.
Because if they do so
then I'll know that they are around
and the game will be over for them..

I trust the wood rail while I go up slowly
my foot checking one step at the time.
Air cooled from the top landing open door
meets the smelly kitchen stuff
against the rough cold edge of the wall
up on top of the stairs
so familiar
when I touch it
to turn around to the dining room.

I know there is light there.

Crawl Space

Through the square trap-door
I crawl under on my knees
across the cold concrete floor.
Dim light: I recognize
painted blue chair,
baby stroller, other things.
The wedding trunk protects
from mold and dust
Dad's war jacket,
Mom's wedding dress,
box of letters,
photographs.

Their time for me alive again.
I deepen my hands and pull
each of them out to the light.

Lifting a Stone

A black ant drags an olive pit.
Three brown cockroaches run
all over to find darkness.
A rusty key with missing top.
On a Safeway discolored and ripped receipt
paid cash for deli bread, free range eggs,
two hundred grams of feta cheese,
a telephone number written under:
Jessica phone tonight.

5. Summit

Alouette Lake

Damp grey air smelling of soil and wet grass

and moss and bark and escape desire dreaming

to be in the forest camping next to the fire

with you and the dog wiggling his tail

to the sparks and pancakes on the Coleman stove.

J's Café

Real flowers and lace at the windows.
J's Cafe' good food coffee truck stop,
rice veggie double burger decker lying
over fries, huge unwanted bed.
Why pay phones at each table? I ask the waitress.
So they can talk to their families home.
Shrines of polished chrome,
splendid greens and blues,
luscious red strokes:
truck photos.
Real power.

Deer

Coquialla Canyon *Cawacawa river*

Carolin mines *Sowaqua river*

Deer for 8 km signs flash away,

leave behind

images populated

by deer crossing

north and south of the fence

their surviving separated families

no longer connected.

New Golden Star

New Golden Star restaurant
at Old Hope Princeton Highway.
She looks at flower-shaped carrots
floating among green onions
in her fuming wonton soup.
Where should we start organizing
our new house? she asks.
1 think we should throw stuff away, he says.
I wanted to try a conversation, she whispers.
Until we keep things, sentimental value
is going to hold us down, he says.
She looks at the carrot flowers floating
among onions and a cauliflower stick
emerging from the wonton soup
and does not answer.

Canadian Parnassus

Coquialla Summit very close.
Gold rush trail sign
in a flash already gone.
Two bears graffited stone.
Car slows down. Car stops. Stuck.
Canadian Parnassus peak 5 Ks away
mountain of poets,
Apollo and the Muses,
memory of Homeric battles,
gods controlling fools and heroes.
Anything can happen in
the house of the gods.
We get help from Mercury this time,
young and gentle as usual.
I check for his wings.
They're hidden in his socks.
He drives a silver and blue
tow truck these days
radio-phone and the whole bit.
He does not drink
nectar made out from garlic
but tea and eats
crunchy granola bars.

Solitude

In the darkness of the
abandoned Church
my heart
shivers with fear: why do only
the birds
outside the open windows
praise God
this morning of
October
in loud and joyous
voice.

Signs

Black letters on white sign
Prepare to meet God stands
up from gold corn and green fields
sprinklered with water and diluted
rotten manure.

6. Short Stories

Kegs, Demijohns and Other Things (excerpt) *

[…]

It's pleasant to guess our way to UBC, with curves and bends on the road until we are told it's time to descend. Chicken freed from the hen-house, we timidly walk away from the bus while the doors slam on us and the gear engages and the exhaust fumes float in the air.

"We are in a large field, a safe place, it is actually a gravel parking lot." Rick announces "At this point you are on your own. Walk into the forest. There is a trail. Follow it. Find your way. Use the cane, use your stretched out arms. Watch for trees. Use the hearing to orient yourselves. And have fun." Immobility is my safest reaction for a minute. I stay still. Then I become aware of the smell of grass. Recognizing something makes me feel safer. With the highway at my shoulders, I start moving away from the car noise. The voices of the others, I imagine already into the trail, come somehow distant and muffled by the trees.

I'm surprised at my sense of orientation. As soon as I quiet my fear of being left behind, I find easy to follow their voices. I check the ground with my cane, it's even and uniform, but not smooth, made it seems by crushed stones, by the way it opposes resistance to my shoes. I swing my cane left and right to feel the edge of the path; this gives me confidence, somehow a sense of control. My right hand now stretches out to search for the many branches along the side of the trail; the scent of the resin is released to my touch. "Olfaction" Rick told us "is the most powerful of all senses. It can instantly drive to other spaces, and is certainly the most evocative." This is how my mind went back to Casa Martorana in Casteldaccia.

*

The first time I saw the *Portone* of Casa Martorana opened was in the summer of '92. It opened into the sunlight bathed *Baglio*, colonnade walls bearing traces of the last lime whitewashed, machines placed in the court as if they were about to start working again, squishing grapes, crushing olives. Mr.

* Pietro selected this excerpt from a longer story.

Martorana was standing next to the white wall, in the shade of the carriage entrance. He was talking to a small old woman dressed in black, under his arm a book and a newspaper. I smiled at that, he had obviously breathed fresh air from other places. I crossed the *Portone*; at our approach he, very gently, came forward. I introduced my son Pietro, saying more to myself than to them how exciting was for me to discover that part of my enchanted childhood remained real in this place. He smiled and I knew he understood me. He had emigrated to northern Italy, to follow his dreams, but he had left his soul in here. We both shared the same experience. Mr. Martorana offered a tour of the building and while I was taking photographs, he explained Pietro how the rusty equipment had once worked. We went through rooms that had once been kitchens, stores, stables. Empty rooms now, that had not been used for fifty years, a chair or a table remaining here or there, long cobwebs trailing in back light. “In this room we kept the kegs and the goat skins hung to dry, inside out.” In saying that he opened the last door of our tour, at the right of the main entrance. I stepped in and suddenly felt dizzy. It was the same smell that had filled the store rooms in grandmother’s Caterina house, the very same high dark wood ceiling. the huge stone archways, the small barred window open high onto the garden, the oak kegs, the green demijohns held in place by netted ropes, all there, intact. And all over the same smell of olive oil gone rancid, of wine gone sour, of moldy goat skin. I opened my eyes, while Pietro was asking something about the goat skin that was hanging from the ceiling, next to the steelyard. Mr. Martorana looked at my face and smiled again. I wanted to grab the odour, but I knew there was no way. There was no way to stop it for me; I could not photograph it, I could not sketch it. I could only remember it. I closed my eyes again, breathed as intensely as I could and wished, wished to stop time.

*

The trail has become very wide now, so wide that I lose my sense of orientation. So I walk zig-zaging from one edge to the other, very aware of every imperfection on the ground, of every bend in the trail, of voices direction still far away of me.

“Leave the path now. Try the forest.” ‘Ah, there is no end to this ground breaking.’ I say yes to myself, but it takes all my

courage to step over the edge of the well trimmed path and go straight into the bushes. The cane at this point is useless, as dead trees cover the ground and wild berry bushes make a thick net, through which I count my steps, to be sure I can find my way back. The sun is not of much help in these shady rounds. 'I know that as long as I have the highway noise in my left ear, I'm going East. Of course this doesn't take into consideration the winding of the path and, for what I know, it may now have turned North or even South, and I may never be able to find it back. It feels rather a long time since I have been in. I may be lost. Definitely this romantic exploration of the forest is not for me. Suddenly while I battle against crawling thoughts, the highway noise is blocked and I feel a presence to my right, a silent presence, tall. I say "Rick?" He doesn't answer. "Who is there… Can you answer, please…" The silence is uninterrupted. I stand still. The other doesn't move, doesn't answer. I'm ready to take my goggles off, before he assaults me, immobilizing my arms, before he throws me on the floor, right there, his shinny blade out, ready to hit. Instead I extend my arms to encounter him, and embrace a Fir tree.

'Stop Maria. There is no sense in panicking this way. This is life, put yourself in this situation, now you cope with it, you break through or you take your goggles out and give up. Put yourself together. Where is the highway noise coming from. Your right ear? Good, then you are heading East. The path cannot be too far.' A sun ray touches suddenly my right arm. 'O dear, thank you.' My feet move softly on fresh moss, I'm out of the woods and soon with the cane, I feel the gravel pile up on the side of the trail. I smile, as Amerigo Vespucci did when he 'discovered' America being there as he had thought. He wasn't blindfolded, though, but no difference. I hear Rick's voice and everybody else's coming back. Back to the clearing. Rick says good-bye. "You can take your blind fold off now or keep it on, if someone guides you. When you take it off, do it slowly, very slowly. Keep your eyes closed for a while. Sun light hurts."

"Do you want me to guide you?" I ask Steve.

Serafina

"How is Riccardo Riccardone and his big belly?" I ask you.

"Mom, don't talk like that about my husband," you answer, right away.

"And you," I continue, "you should never have married a villain like that."

"Oh, yeah! Remember that, by marrying me, he turned me into a lady."

"But, because of him, you left me."

"Mom, that happened 35 years ago. Don't tell me that that's what you have been thinking all these years and now it, finally, comes out."

Perhaps it has been on her mind, it hasn't crossed mine. Still, burning in a desolation of solitary nights, in the soundless house where I can hear my heart-beat like a motor racing outside on the *via Nigra*…Nothing has changed her mind, not even when she found out about my illness. So she will take my few belongings from this room where she placed me, in this *pensionato*, and throw them in a black maxi garbage bag, together with my clothes and my shoes, like if I was a stray cat. Maybe she won't even cry over my death, *ahimè*, like I really was just some dead cat.

I look at her now and can't resist.

"Look at your hair. Do something with it. You look like a fool, why don't you comb it."

"I already did," you answer.

"Go, go comb it again, now. And these shoes, so thick, so heavy looking, why in the world do you wear them with these thick wool socks." You still won't obey, same as you have never would in the past. You just laugh.

"*Ehi* Mom," you say now, "do you remember when I was five years old, in Troina, and every day I would set the table and poured some red wine for you in a *rosolio* glass. 'Can I have some,' I would beg you, and your answer was unequivocally: 'No.' Day after day I would look at the magic. transparent red-burgundy liquid, would sniff the smell and then finally bring the tiny glass to my lips and it was good. From that day I sipped more and more, until I filled the glass twice for me and then

poured a little for you."

"You never change," I say, "never obey. I never could trust you with anything." But go on laugh, like you usually do,

"Mom, even though you are a noble woman, this isn't how you should talk to people," you insist. "I'm worried they'll kick you out from here, sooner or later." And in saying that, you come closer and put your hand on mine.

"Ahi, ahi, don't touch me," I have to say, "take your hand away. It's so hot and rough it burns my skin."

You laugh and continue; "People say to me: 'Lovely mother you have. She's like a general, telling everybody what and what not to do. Has she always been this way?' they ask."

"*Ahimè*", "I say and tap on my left hand with the other.

"Stop, Mom," you say right away. "That noisy nonsense bugs people You know how they complain."

"Ignore those old women. I'm almost a centenarian, I deserve respect from everyone," I say.

"How vain you are You are only 90 years old, Mom, and they are not much younger than you."

"Oh yes, I'm almost a centenarian. At my age, l own my own body. I can do any thing I want with it. What is this now? Let me move as I please. Don't tell me what I can and what I can not do. Forget about those old rascals, I mean the old women that sit on high-back black vinyl armchairs to watch TV. I sit away from those women. One of them controls the sound and the channels up and down, all the time. That one over there is disgusting, skirt up above her knees - sickening, repulsive. When she sits down, she shows everything up her legs. And look at this other one, what a white skull she has on her. She gets up. What is she getting up for? What do you want? *Eh*? Anything wrong? They are: a bunch of loathsome peasants."

"Mom, Mom stop. You can't talk this way about people."

"Yes, I can. I can say anything I want. *Bah!* Don't touch my hair with your rough hands. *Ahi, ahi.* I'm not talking to them. I'm talking to myself, to you."

"Your voice is loud."

"No, it is not."

"Do you remember one day at lunch. 'Don't people use forks in here?' you protested in loud voice, and slapping the palms of your hands on the table causing a huge commotion.

‘Can you say please?’ Sister Superior asked gently. ‘Mind your business.’ you answered.”

“That’s not true. Who told you that.”

“Sister Celina, of course.”

“Oh, yes, Sister *Angelina.”* I say to her, “What am I doing still here? Why don’t I croak? Forgotten here only to suffer so much. I can hardly move, the power this leg here has left me. *Ahimè*.” You say ‘You must live for us. We need you. We need you to pray for us. If you don’t do it, who else will.’ Yes, I pray everyday, when I wake up in the morning and after the siesta, in my bed, quiet, when the pain is asleep, and the noise of the street has quieted down, because everyone is at rest too, I say a Rosary for you. “Sister Angelina “. . . . .

“You mean Sister Celina, Mom,” you correct me.

“Yes, Sister Celina-*Angelina* plays tricks on me. She says she is going to be transferred to another convent. I say no, that’s not possible; as I live -- that cannot happen.”

“Mom her name is Celina. Angelina was our nanny and was killed during the bombing in Troina. Do you remember, mom?”

“Yes” I answer “It was not my fault, as her parents said, because she was 15 years old and I had sent her to the neighbor farmer to borrow a baker’s shovel. You wanted to go too; but I said no, it is too dangerous. ‘Go and come back right away, Angelina. Don’t start playing with the farmer’s daughter’ But she did. The plane spotted them on the threshing floor and came down. Just one plane, all for them. It was August, at midday. We hid inside our cottage-farm in terror, until at midnight, in a low voice, somebody called *Professore Rizzo*, and then we found out. It was not my fault, as her parents said.”

I sit alone in my room on this folding director’s chair, softened by the cushion you made before you brought me here. That was three years ago. I remember, it was not pleasant for me No. It wasn't at all, when you brought me here and I said good-bye to my apartment where I had lived for 40 years; where my husband had died in his bed, and my son died the way he did. *Ahimè.* I look at the diamond on my finger, the ring my husband gave me together with the pendant earrings and their blue-white diamonds. They used to spread the light every time I moved my

head to laugh. He looked at me then, but I did not know how to respond to his loving gaze, and so I didn't. I didn't with him, I didn't with you kids. Only now, over the phone, when you send me kisses from overseas, I have learned to send kisses back. But still when you are here and you touch me, I can't stand it. Your hands are too hot, I tell you, and you laugh. Only once did I allow you to see me in distress, when I ran at the sound and found your dad on the floor and I called you for help and you came and together we lifted him back on the bed. And then I embraced and called and kissed him and feared he would die. And I also remember another time. Right after the war, we were still evacuees in Troina. Your dad had left in the morning for Catania, to go back to teaching again after the war and find us a house, so we could live back with him and leave the mountain town. That evening we were visiting the archpriest. A neighbor came, knocked at the door and in a quiet voice said your husband has arrived. The snow stuck to my silk nylons as I ran as quickly as I could, holding each of you kids by the hand, up the basalt steps that took us to the last house, at the end of the road. All the while I was asking the neighbor, who ran with us, *Why is he back? What has happened? Is he all right?* When I saw and I called him by his name *Where is the other hand?* -- and I pressed the empty sleeve -- *Where is your arm?* He laughed and -- *Search under my coat* -- he said. I put my hand under and touched a hard cold damp surface. *The arm is there*, he laughed again. And you kids, by then, were assaulting him with questions, laughs and kisses. You climbed over his knees, begged him to show the wall. *The wail, the wall, show us the wall. Dad has a wall on his chest.* You children, you could not understand why I could not be part, in my anxiety, of your joy. I almost envied your energy, your ability to laugh with him, to kiss, to hold and turn his face to your faces, with sticky hands that were grabbing his long chin, his fleshy ears; his straight reddish hair. We slept in.one large bed the four of us, made with two beds of different height, held together by thin ropes; one made by wood boards, the other of broken flat springs and a goat skin under the bottom linen to keep you children warm and soft; you next to dad with the walled up chest, and your brother next to me, except when you, rarely, agreed to take turns; then one morning you both woke up earlier than usual and found dad and morn in the center and both of you on the

edges; both sat up, calling each other and yelling over our heads, about that mysterious case. Dad laughed and the problem was only mine."

"Yes, Morn. I also remember there was no electricity in the: house I remember we had a candle on, at night. A fresh egg a la coque with salt sprinkled on it, for supper. We dipped homemade bread cut in sticks to break the soft yoke and the first bite had the taste of salt. When the wind blowing outside made the flame dance, we felt safe in the room. I looked at the print of a handsome man with long hair and a heart drawn on his chest and asked who he was and you said it was the Sacred Heart of Jesus."

I sit on this chair. This is my world, now. I had better accept it. Where are all my things, reliquary of the past I saved for so many years, waiting for you to come back fifteen, sixteen years, 1 got tired of holding onto them. Things from our past your Dad's boots, so heavy and so tight on his legs when he fought in France during the first World War. The brown sweater I patiently unraveled separating the wool to make boy's shorts, never finished, yes, never finished.

'Who do you see at home, who is there these days, where is everyone?' I ask every time you visit. I remember we had a little goat, and chickens, and a black turkey. But you are lifting your head, looking at me, puzzled, almost surprised.

"Are you talking about grandmother's house, your brothers and sister?" you ask me one day.

"Yes," I answer and you bow your head in silence. I don't dare to ask why.

"And the lemons, have they cropped the lemons?" I demand, and again you lift your head, look at me.

"Lemons?" you ask.

"Yes, lemons, from our orchards running down the hill, how much have the metayers sold them for."

"Five lira." you answer. I think that is what we where selling them for when I was small. Then things can't have changed much, these days. But you continue, "Mom, there are no orchards, any more. Just four lemon trees, in our garden. Don't you remember, Mom -- the land was expropriated to build schools and roads. Don't you remember?"

Not really. What I remember is the house were I grew up, the house where your future dad came with a long scented tuberose flower in his hand for me. Every day of summer, in the garden under the umbrella pine. All dressed up in white linen suit, with his tanned dry skin, slim, elegant, he was, leaning onto the rough skin of the old mulberry trunk. And I looked at both skins and I liked them both.

Three years ago, when I was still living in my house and we were in the garden, I remember I asked you, 'Are you sure there is a spot ready for me in the family tomb? When I die I want the town band to play while they take me around the town square, before going into the church. You know, I'm the last of the old generation, the oldest in our family.' Then I asked you: 'When are you going to leave?' 'Tuesday,' you answered. 'And today is?' 'Today is Saturday.' 'Then I have three days to die. I have to die while you are here. If you are gone and I die, how can I help myself. I'll be straight, stiff in my bed like a mummy, I won't be able to move.' 'Mom, if you are dead, why would you care?' I looked at you with surprise. 'Right, I never thought about that.' And we both laughed. Things are changing for me, now. 'Mom, you have stopped bossing people.' you told me.

I thought my body is the last thing I own, the last power to do any thing I want with, the last power left for me in life. And then the day before you brought me here, I found myself shivering in my cold-house, half naked, my legs still good-looking in the stay-up nylons. Then, in front of an electric heater, you undressed, sponge-bathed and dressed me again bit by bit, so I wouldn't freeze. And I never thought this would happen to me, I thought that that was the worst. Until the doctor called by Sister *Angelina* visited me, and you know I was in a very improper position and lost control. My legs were splayed out. 'Go away, go away,' I had to yell to Sister *Angelina*, when she came into the room, 'You are a nun, you are not supposed to see scenes like this.' But she laughed. 'Oh, poor Mom,' you say when I tell you the story, and hug me.

"Mom, the day after tomorrow I'll have to leave, I'll have to go back to my family."

"So you'll all be reunited. I wonder ... do you have to

go?" "Yes Mom, really," you answer. *Ahimè, ahimè,* God's will be done, what can I say or do about it.

I look at you and can't resist: "Go comb your hair. I can't stand looking at you with the hair sticking out that way. Are you dyeing your hair? Why? Your hair wasn't that dark before.

"Are you going from here to New York directly?"

"No, from here to Rome and then to Toronto"

"You'll all be together."

"Mom, I am your daughter, but I'm also a mother and I need to be with my family for Christmas. You are not alone in here, it's like being in a family. You'll be with the ladies, Sister Celina."

"Oh yes, Sister *Angelina.*"

"Mom, her name is Sister Celina."

"Yes, yes, Sister Celina-*Angelina*: You were right three years ago, when you decided I couldn't live alone."

"Yes, I felt very bad forcing you to leave your house and your grocery store and your baker."

"I remember the night before you took me in here, you washed and ironed all my new bed linens and spread them on the sofa and the armchairs to dry their dampness."

"I had to ignore your pleading, the panic in your eyes."

"You were right. But tell me why do you wear these shoes? Are those the only pair you have? They're so ugly."

"But so comfortable, mom."

"How many more days did you say?"

"Three more."

"Yes, three more. There is something I want to tell you, I have been thinking more and more of, these days. I don't know what it means and why it is stuck in my mind. I regret I never sang you lullabies. I remember my mother didn't sing any, I'm afraid I did the same. I wish I could go back now and sing them to you. *Basta, basta.* This is enough," I say when you kiss me three times on one chick and three times on the other and than all over again.

"I'm writing a story about you."

"*Nientemeno!* About me?" I laugh. "You'll have to read to me."

"Oh Mom, how could I? I'm writing it in English."

"You can translate it for me. How many days did you

say."

"Three more."

"Yes, three more. Am I going to see you tomorrow?" "Of course, Mom."

"Don't forget me."

"How could I," is your joyful answer. "I love you." I would like to say the same, but I'm too embarrassed.

She has left. She left this morning, and I already miss her. Will I see her again. Will she see me again alive. I don't even know if she will see me again at all. It takes 24 hours for her to reach me, and if they'll find me dead in the morning, straight, stiff in my bed, not answering to the breakfast call, it'll take some 12 extra hours before she can catch the next plane. So maybe they'll close the lid. If it's a hot day, the scent of the flowers will not be enough to protect their noses; maybe they'll weld the door shut. Then she will come and collect my things, the photos on the wall, the cut spherical clay sculpture, the papier machè water melon slice all sitting on the chest of drawers where the grandsons placed them. The thin plywood cut-out frame my husband made, like lace
now around his face.

Her wedding picture, long hair and mini skirt, a smile of victory when she got what she wanted and left me behind. 'You can come,' she said, but she knew I couldn't leave my town. 'This is where I want to die,' I said. I did not forgive her for, oh, so many years, all these years. Sure you'll have a better life, go with your husband where the work is, and the success. Maybe they'll come back one day. *Ahimè,* my destiny is to die alone. *Oh, povera me, povera me.*

"Good morning, Serafina."

"Good morning, Sister *Angelina*"

"Look at what your daughter has left for you. A note with flowers and this pastry for breakfast." "Oh, my favorite, watermelon jelly," I laugh*. 'To remind you of the sweetness of the soil when it meets the scent of Jasmine just opened in the evening. The sun has just set and the heat still trapped in the soil busts into the energy of the new flower. I love you, mom.' Me too*, I'll tell her, next time the phone rings.

Silvestro

I sing with loud voice '*... la donna è mobile qual piume al vento ... muta l'accento del miei pensier.*' The words of my preferred opera echo my sandal footsteps from room to room. I'm alone in the house.

Fifina and the children are arriving late tonight with the Ferry from Sicily to Reggio Calabria. This summer of 1945 has been a long summer without them, I think as I look at my shabby clothes, grey pants with no pleas, non ironed white dress-shirt with sleeves rolled up, open collar, no tie, the home-made post-war sandals I wear with no socks, the belt and the elastic suspenders that hold my pants up on my skinny stomach. Definitely, even if we are already into the second post-war year, and styles have changed immensely, this is not a proper way to dress for an ex-School Principal.

I laugh into myself, but I don't feel 'safe' if I don't wear suspenders. I know friends laugh at me for this, they say I belong to another century, and that is very true, being born in 1893. When it's wery hot and I'm sitting at a café in a summer evening for a. 'spongato' ice-cream with friends, I have become very skilled in secretly removing my suspenders while I'm still wearing my suit jacket. And so when I take my jacket off I triumphantly surprise them. We all laugh together. I even take my tie off on those evenings.

I asked our deaf mute housekeeper to clean the house and prepare it for my family return. Yesterday morning she left the house in order, as usual. We call her The Mute, even if she manages to tell us with gestures, hand signs and lip movements all the gossips of the neighbourhood. She even convinced Fifina to lend our three-piece brown wool carpet bedroom set, as central isle runner in the village Church, during the Bishop visit. Knowing her, I'm sure she did not allow any of the peasants to walk over them, except of course the Bishop, the priest and the altar boys with their dripping candles.

She walks bare feet. She has never owned a pair of shoes, not even the day she got married. Not even her daughter managed to convince her. Her feet are solid and wide, her skin under the heels is a white callus, thick and rough, and she walks, even now

at 60, with quick and silent gate, only her dress flapping round her legs with a sound of dove wings; she has acquired, as a true Calabrese woman, that perfectly elegant walk, by carrying huge loads on her head; I'm amazed when I see a clay amphora filled with water or a huge wicker basket filled with scented yellow bergamotto, *citrus bergamina*, perfectly balanced on top of her head on a towel ring.

She wears a long straight dress down to her ankles, made out of pale and tight woven white sack material Her grey hair is neatly pulled back and tied in a tight bun behind her head. Her skin, dark for antique air exposure, is covered with fine lines that mark her delicate features with a tight spider's web. I especially like her smiles starting from her pale blue eyes and flooding all the way down to her cavernous mouth with no teeth.

When she talks with no voice and I don't understand her, she tries many times and finally she starts yelling, desperate, and I feel she thinks I am stupid or at least not as intelligent as Fifina, who, being a woman, manages to understand her intuitively and with persevering efforts. It's a problem when I'm in the garden and I want to call her. If I go behind her and tap on her shoulder, she jumps up screaming in fear. So, to attract her attention, I fill my pockets with little pebbles that I throw at the window glass on the first floor, if she works upstairs in the kitchen or, when she is in the garden too far from me and again I want to attract her attention, I throw them in front of her. But sometimes I aim wrong and touch her, especially when I run out of the little pebbles and I use a little bigger size. When I do that, she turns around and starts screaming with her mute voice, but in the end we both laugh.

I take a brake and sit at my writing desk. It has been good for me to be alone for so long. It has allowed me to stop and put my life in order, trying to understand it. I breathe on my bifocals covered with white plaster and Pompeian red paint and wipe them off with the edge of my shirt. The sandals I finished last night for Maria's doll sit on my desk, the hand-stitching around the soles still waxed. Also the long wooden kitchen spoon and fork I carved for Fifina, so she wouldn't burn herself any more, when cooking.

I sharpen my red and blue pencil, red for syntax and

grammar mistakes, blue for lighter mistakes, I use to mark take-home exams. Update my little pocket diary where I record my appointments, the price paid for something, the date of school exams or holidays. I light a cigarette and slowly inhale, hold the smoke in, until I burst it out into a cough. My asma bronchialis, άσδμα βρόγχια, bronchial asthma catches my lungs with its iron claws, and like a Medusa by its thousand snake heads is ready to turn me into a frozen dead stone. Two winters ago I had a cold, one of my miserable colds, and to alleviate my misery I bought a little flask of rum and once in a while I drank a little of it, using the lid as glass or even drinking a sip directly from the bottle. Fifina was upset and begged me not to do that in front of the children, acting as if I was a drunken man. The almost empty bottle sat in the light-blue kitchen closet, month after month, for one year. One day I heard the children asking, "Mom, what's in this bottle?" holding the bottle against the window to activate the amber luminosity of the liquid. "It's a liquor. Don't touch it." she replied. "What's a liquor?" they asked. "It's a strong wine," she replied. "Can we have a sip?" And she promptly said, "No, no! Is not good for you." "But Dad drank it, so it was good!" "...for him. He's older.., he can drink it. Dad drank from it when he had a cold, so the bottle is full of germs, don't touch it." I had to laugh, but kept quiet.

I cough and spit on the day-before newspaper, when I run out of toilet paper. Then I fold it and put it in the waste paper basket, in my studio. Everyone goes around it at distance, as if my germs in the sea of mucus could slide out and attack the world.

I place on a plate three anchovies in a little puddle of olive oil and a handful of oven-cured black olives; on another plate, with a slice of home made bread, a cube of yellow butter fresh of the day, I buy, still creamy, at the creamery in Ravagnese; they emboss a daisy on top. I take my favourite lunch in the dining room. It's time for the news on the radio. Every day I listen at the news, one after the other, on the three different radio programs, breakfast, lunch and dinner. I don't understand why, but that's stronger than me, it's a sort of compelling force from the inside, almost a duty, a responsibility. "Silenzio!" I yell, when the children are around. I know I impose the family an

absolute silence at meals, but discipline is important. I hear the kids laugh and whisper, and their voices jingling twittering and joyous overpower the raven croak of the news-reader. The static in the communication from New York makes our Telefunken wood cabinet vibrate in syntony, with a metallic sound.

"Who is talking inside the radio?" Cicì asks. "A man..." Maria explains. She laughs. "...a man? How can a man be inside the box... who put him in there ... the whole man?" "...just the head, unless he's a tiny man," she keeps explaining. We all laugh at the joke. My electric-waves-transmission-without-a-connecting-wire explanation has not grabbed Cicì's imagination, but Maria's does. "Roosevelt, Churchill and Chiang Kai-shek are meeting today in Cairo..." The voice of our correspondent from New York (Ruggero Orlando) is coming and going, as if travelling through the ocean, through thunderstorms and lightning; in reality, I suspect, him unable to hold the microphone steady, having had the usual too many drinks at night. "Why is that man talking in there?" "To tell, us what's happening in the world. These are the news." 'Who is Ruz-velt?" "He is the President of the United States" "What is the United States?" "Do you remember when the American soldiers came to Troina? Well, they came from the United States, across the ocean." "What is the ocean?" "It's a very, very large sea." "Ah!"

Our radio had not worked for years, since the time we had damped everything in storage and moved quickly to Troina, looking for a safe place where to retreat during the War. Now that Radio Movies, broadcasted from film 'canned pictures' or even with living actors, seem to be the next development in the Radio industry. I thought it was about time to have our radio fixed and so I started looking for someone capable of doing it. Then finally I found someone who said he could fix it. So he came all the way from Reggio to our house, next to the military airport in Ravagnese. I was so excited. Oh, so excited at the idea of being connected to the sound of the world again. He worked for many hours, took everything out from the cabinet, and then separated each piece apart, and I wondered if he was ever, testing after testing, going to put things back again. And then suddenly there was music in the house, loud. Fifina came in quickly, "Not so loud, not so loud!" "We are testing it, Signora," the man said.

Our children, until then playing in the orchard with neighbourhood children, quickly said goodbye and came running upstairs, all excited. The world had changed suddenly into a new dimension, a new layer of sound added to the voices of chickens and piglets, horses and rare automobiles dashing on the *statale* and the voice of the man on the bicycle cart with bell, selling ice-cream cones for two am-lire. But it was not the music station that grabbed me. It was a small distant station full of static noises. The voice was very far, almost inaudible, almost disappeared when the correspondent from New York was on line. It required an absolute silence in the room. It was too bad that the news were always coinciding with our meals. And because not everything came out clear, I had to switch stations and move to the next news at 1:30, and the same would happen at dinner time.

The children could not understand why it would be so important for me to listen to the news, to get every single word of the communiqué, to be well informed at every moment of the day and the night about the world news; to be constantly in touch, to understand what was going on, not only in the world, but also around us. What we, ourselves, were doing, not only belonging to history in general as everyone else does, but feeling as we were actually making History. Radio is now our new way to connect, our way to remain sane, to know we are not the only survivors, this did not happened in Verdun in 1918.

*

There has been a terrible incursion today and it is like hell through the forest. When things calm down and darkness comes almost sooner than yesterday, I call softly my orderly and my dispatch-man, I try calling them again and again and then I call the name of all my other men, one by one. My voice echoes back from one tree trunk to the other, but when it comes back, it is my voice alone. And so, alone, I wander for many hours, lost in the bushes, blinded by tears, low branches scratching my hands and my face while I try to open myself a passage. All my men have died and I am the only survivor. When I finally accept this reality, I check back to the camp. The moon high on the sky guides my steps and suddenly I hear voices; voices crying, voices crying words in Italian, "*II Capitano Rizzo è morto,*" crying me as a dead man. "I'm here," I laugh. Not a single man of my own

has died. I am the only one lost and then found. We will not sleep much tonight.

*

Communication did not go right all the time on those days. It did not go right for me on August 1915.

*

On January 1915, I am called up to arms. On May of the same year Italy comes up into the War and I am sent in one of the most dangerous areas of the front line. I go back home on winter pass. I left Mom in Troina with all our family, all except me, her youngest. The fact I risk now my life, month by month, day by day, throws her in a continuous anxiety. Her youngest son, the one she has renounced to, for years and for a holy cause, the one she has offered to the protection of the Seminary, is now suddenly at total risk, not only of evil worldly encounters, but of his own life She cannot survive. I say, "Where's Mom?" They all look at me, "Didn't they tell you; didn't they give you the telegram? Mom has been in the cemetery for six months now. On Tuesday night she goes to bed, her thoughts as every night before sleeping for you, her youngest son at war. Next morning we find her dead." it is August 10th 1915, three months after I have been sent to war. One of my brothers sends a telegram to my Regiment Commander at the front line to have me back for the funeral. I guess the Command has been receiving too many telegrams regarding too many dead mothers, so their policy is not to grant any pass to anybody, for any reason. Not having granted me a leave, they think better throw the telegram in the garbage. So they do.

I sit the whole night awake, staring at the blank wall in front of my bed. So many things she has wanted for me, taken away.

One day, I am seven, Mom prepares me an omelette; places it between two slices of bread, wraps it in a kitchen cloth to protect it from flies and tells me, "Don't eat it too soon, or you'll be starving before evening. Don't eat it before the sun is very high on the sky." I take off to the farm. When I arrive, after a long walk up the trail, I'm already starving. But Mom has told me to wait until the sun is high on the sky, before I eat. So, to fill

my stomach, I take a long drink of water from the little amphora wrapped in a wet cloth to cool it up; and place my sandwich still wrapped and smelling good on top of the wall, to protect it from the scavenging dogs. Then I go in the fields to do my work, and when I'm tired to dig out ripe onions I look up to the sky to see if the sun is high enough for me to have lunch. Then with the tail of my eyes I check the wall where in the morning I placed my omelette, just on time to see our cow finish gulping the end of mom's white and red kitchen napkin. I run, yelling, impotent, starving. There's nothing I can eat until evening, except raw onions. I try them, but really I can't. I look around. There's really nothing I can eat, except some patches of grass sheep have left behind for some reason, I wonder why. I think, if sheep do eat grass, why can't I? So I drop on my knees right next to the green patch. I have never seen this kind of plant with red stem and fine hair growing on top of the dark leaves; but who cares. Starvation is starvation, I think. I eat. By evening I'm still rolling on my stomach in pain.

That, I think, signs off my future as farmer.

When I am 15 years old, my family decides the youngest of the 11 born will become a priest, and that is me. It's good to have a priest in the family. Prayers are assured, of course; and also literacy. So mom sews three new shirts, pants and underwear for me, and with new shoes I take off to the Seminary; four years in Nicosia, two and half in Cefalù. So I start studying Latin and Greek, and translate classics every day. My reading is good, so one day I'm called by the Rector, "You have a clear, strong voice and are a good reader," he says. "From now on you'll be in charge of the readings for the congregation at lunch time. You'll have your lunch when everyone else has finished and as reward you'll have a glass of vine." I like the good wine.

On January 1915 I'm called up to the arms. Someone, again, has decided my life for me. When war is over, things have changed, l will not go back to the Seminary.

*

Today it's Sunday. The weather is still warm like in full summer, even though is cooled down, here in Calabria, more then

on the north shores of Sicily, by the current and the breeze of Messina Straight. I look down through the midday sunlight, filtered by the dining room shutters. The bitter orange trees that bear flaming-red large fruits in December, are still all green. Today, the second of September 1945, is the day I have waited for, with bigger expectation during the last couple of weeks. At beginning I enjoyed my solitude and peace, but that enjoyment didn't last; I soon started missing their voices, the news interrupted by their sudden laughs, their kisses, unexpected. I call Maria my sun, "How can I live without the sun?" She laughs. Tonight I can lift them up again, I can bring them to order during news time; I will sign the end of two silenced months.

And maybe Fifina will accept my dream. I asked her, before they left, "Now that the children are growing up, we could buy a motorcycle with a side-car, a little oval shaped seat on the side of the motorcycle where you, Fifina, can sit comfortably and safely with the children." ''Oh, no! It'll be too uncomfortable and dangerous." "No, no! I promise you will sit comfortably and safely. It does even have a little door on the side for you to get in." "My hair will fly high in the air." "I'll go slow when you are on." "Oh, yes. But when you are alone, you'll go fast." That I cannot promise I won't do. How can I give up its speed, faster than a fast car, the wind in my ears, the roar of the motor scaring away the chickens on the road, living the barking dogs behind. "It'll be dusty and sunny and windy. Oh, yes! It'll be windy," she concludes. The children, hopeful until then, come to my rescue, "Mom, please, say 'yes'. It'll be so fun, oh, so fun to go to Reggio for an ice cream on the motorcycle. Promise, we'll be good."

The voice of the radio announcer pulls me back from my dreams, "Today in Tokyo bay, aboard the US flagship Missouri, the Japanese foreign minister Shigemitsu Mamoru signed the document first, on behalf of the emperor Hirohito and his government..." So this is the end; the end of this unbelievable, atrocious story originated by a count down to zero, the push of two buttons. But a signature cannot wipe out reality. In my ears is still his voice announcing the news, just three weeks ago, "The combined heat and blast pulverized everything in the explosion's immediate vicinity, generated spontaneous fires some distance

away, produced winds that fanned the flames..." *Requiescant in pace*, may they rest in peace, is all my heart can cry. How can I look at my children and call myself educator, if this is the rule we go by? What will my children make out from it? And what the children of my children? Are they still going to fight in the name of justice with their inner desire to be cruel, as it has always happened for centuries in the past? Will they suddenly one day become wise enough to see what ego craving for power demands? *Dorninus meus, fiat voluntas Tua,* my God, thy will be done, is all my heart can cry. And I remember the devastation I saw in Verdun and Reims in 1918.

*

When I reach Verdun, the streets are full of debris and empty of life. The Cathedral, with no roof, is now turned into skeletal arms imploring forgiveness, so much art work destroyed by bomb explosions; and I, as many normal people like me, sons of peasants like me, just because I have studied, not only I am paid to help killing but become responsible for the life of these people I command here, on the front line. I am one of the few Sicilians, here. Most are from northern Italy. Their accent, their names so different from mine, and yet, each carrying green fertile fields in their hearts, and dried, arid, beautiful mountains in mine, in this bushy landscape of France, we bond.

*

In my studio, now, I open the bottom drawer of my writing desk, where I keep my war memories and pull out my 4'x 5 ½' notebook. I hold it in my hands, light and small enough to slip easily into my pocket. I slide my hand over the burgundy hard cover, slide my finger over the word 'Memorie' embossed together with art nouveau flowery decoration at the four corners. The elastic band, that kept it closed with notes and other sheets inside it, now hangs loose. I open the booklet. On the first page I have written

IIIrd Infantry Regiment
1st Sappers Unit
2nd Lieutenant Rizzo Silvestro June 26, 1917

Italy has been two years and one month into the war.

I open the second page; small-squared paper, I have divided into columns. Here I find, written in my good calligraphy, what I need to know about my 99 men, the muster roll, the year of birth, their name, their profession, how many months they have been at the front, how many wounds, if they are married, if they have children. Most of them are older than me. The oldest, born in 1978, is 39 years old, the youngest, many of them, are 21 years old. On the last column I have written their duty. First I look for our stretcher carriers (bearers?) Giuseppe and Giacomo, always there in first row when we need them. Then I look for my orderly, 1 find him, Armando Busi, in the 1st squad. He is a miner and has already spent 24 months at the front. So I consider him a veteran even if, having being born in 1889, he is only four years older than me; but four years at our age do count a lot. Here is Emilio, our cook, who was a carpenter in his previous existence, and is now our chef. I say chef because it's incredible what he can create out of the raw material he is supplied with. He is 28, married and has a child back home. He has been here at the front for two long years, and has seen his child growing between his furloughs. He doesn't talk much about his family, but when I see him chopping carrots and onions for our minestrone with fury, and tears run down his cheeks, I wonder if he is crying for the onions or for his unfair life.

I read the column where I list their profession. They are miners, masons, farmers, carpenters, stone-cutters. And then there is our tailor Luigi, on whom we rely to hold our pants up, when we loose more weight; the blacksmith indispensable to keep our mules well shod up the mountain trails; the electrician, the shoemaker, the boatman Edoardo, unfortunately not of much use here in these trenches, unless it rains a lot, and last, but not least, our barber Giovanni, who in previous life was a tram driver, but is now engaged in a personal war against lice, he chooses to attack with his razor.

Some of the pages are still attached to each other. I separate them delicately, not to tear them apart.

There is a hole perforating the book. It is not correct to call it a hole; it is more a violent tearing of the paper fibres. It has torn some of the names out. There is a sort of negative embossing effect. At the front cover, the hole has fairly clean edges, an oval shape placed on a diagonal, the cardboard not existing any more.

Then, from the first page on, the hole has shattered voids and the paper is pushed in. The back cover has the cardboard still attached, but violently torn.

I fold lengthwise ½ of a small-squared sheet of paper. With the blue side of the red and blue pencil I just sharpened before lunch, I write "Muster of the First Sappers Unit of the 111th Infantry Regiment, placed in my left external pocket, the moment I was wounded by a shrapnel bullet. D... F... August 7th 1917." 1 wrap the paper around the muster until it fits snug. 1 dig from the my desk top drawer a thin white cotton string and wrap it around the sheet a few times, to keep it in place around the muster. Then I tie a butterfly knot. I put the booklet back in the last drawer of my desk. I hope one of my children, when they grow up, will want to open it again and keep these names alive.

When I put the muster back in the bottom drawer, I touch I thin roil of paper. Ah, I think, and pull it out slowly. I unroll it and the face of Mussolini pops out and stares at me with, his powerful eyes. The usual large article title on front page crowns his head, extolling his power to the stars.

And yet there was a time, at beginning, when we believed his words and he actually did 'good' for us. He really did. Things seemed out of hope by the end of 1st World War. We needed a leader to guide us through a reemergence, to a functioning life. We needed a leader we could trust, intelligent; willing to speak out, to take risks, to be able to handle power, to change things, to take responsibility, to have a strong enough voice to be heard. And here he comes, he steps forward; not handsome, not rich, just one of us, just a ten years older then me son of blacksmith. His eyes are piercing, his voice forceful, his eloquence competing with Cicero's; his jaw prominent to an incredible will power. Of course nobody new at that time he had been evicted from school after school for causing riots or for blinding a schoolmate with his pocket knife. These news infiltrated, later on by word of mouth, among us at a much later date.

He got power and with power the good deeds came. Our life was guided by strict rules. And rules were enforced.

I saw villages being built for the farmers in Sicily, eventually abandoned. In the school, I remember we installed intercoms in every class. I could communicate at any moment

with the teachers and even question students in class, without leaving my office. I could have also checked on the teachers' performances without them knowing, but I didn't think that was moral. We went for school trips, ladies with pretty hats, boys with marine collars or Balilla black shirts and girls with long double braids wearing their black capes. Gym time was always choreographic gymnastics. It was a pleasure to see the teachers stretch themselves for once to a good performance."

I look now at two large official school photos. The school courtyard is crowded with people, all the teachers and students in their uniform are assembled for the opening of the school year and the installation of the new exciting loud speaker system in the school. It's the 16th of October, 1939 The Director of Education is visiting and there are official talks. We stand behind a large table with carved legs placed on a platform. As principal, I am giving the official speech for the opening ceremony of the new scholastic year. I have no clue now of what I am saying, but I see people listening and smiling. I see the two priests smiling. I see a lady with a feather on her hat smiling, I see a couple of fat men in uniform, their hands resting on their sward, smiling, I see the director himself smiling. I look at my boots, shiny my uniform, impeccable and think of Fifina waiting for me at home, of Maria ten months old, and think life is just beautiful.

Things soon change.

What had been a dream, is slowly running towards a catastrophe. He has all the qualities we need from him, all except one. He can not stop. He is like an automobile running downhill with no brakes. His mania pulls him to be a new Napoleon, to build a new empire, to declare to his army chief of staff, while Italy is entering a lost war, "... I only need a few thousand dead so I can sit at the peace conference as a man who has fought."

So we are dragged in a current, sometimes not even understanding or maybe not believing what is happening, trying to keep our jobs, even our lives intact.

Long gone are the times we had dreamed for us. Now is war again.

"You have been transferred to Reggio Calabria, where you will be teaching..." The letter arrives out of the blue, the date, 1941. I am dismissed from my position as Principal of the Monti

Institute in Pordenone. Why this? There is no verbal or written explanation. The decision has been taken. Everyone in the school, maybe not everyone though, is as surprised as I am. But maybe it makes sense. The man of the south better goes back to the south, where he belongs, they think. The man who talks too much has to be quieted. The man who questions unfair things, has to be taken away. My seat is quickly taken, while I am still packing during sleepless nights my family to the south.

Once again someone has decided my life for me.

*

I feel lucky. A few months ago I meet someone. He is a young lad from Venice. He tells me, “After Fascism was over, I was imprisoned by the partisans gone to power, for having believed and having been outspoken during the Fascism time. In prison my life is terrible, day after day reduced to elementary animal like routine. I fear my brain will atrophy, without any intellectual activity. And do you know what saves me? Every morning I mentally assign myself some equations to solve, and every afternoon some more to energize my brain, a long strip that fills my empty hours."

A burst of anger fills my chest. How can people have such a play in other people’s life? How is that so?

I feel like a river is flooding me, I can’t even breathe. I feel, if I don’t do anything, it will swallow my life. Words come to my mind. I get up from my armchair and go to my bookshelf, I look for that book there it is. I take it in my hands, and look for the poem. I find it and re-read it. This tiger will not be me, it will not be me, I think.

I put all the papers back where they belong and shut the drawer.

The day is still light. I have enough time before night comes to hide my presents in secret places of the house. When they’ll arrive, they’ll have to look for them, they’ll have to search every corner. I’ll guide them and spot on their faces the surprise, the joy my gift will bring them, and I’ll wait for their arms to wrap around my neck

Its head is straight and full of energy, it's long and fair mane is almost translucent against the warm afternoon sunlight. The horse is standing still. It is a beautiful horse. I look at my work, I like what I have done. I just finished this morning painting its legs, Pompeian red. I'm proud of myself. It has taken three times, with layers of plaster and gauze, to re-do its head, bigger and bigger over its wooden structure, until now it looks just perfect for the size of the horse. The mane and the tail I made of pure raffia from Madagascar, long and strong. The reins I made of thick hide to hold back its desire to gallop away with Cicì, when he comes back. The eyes I painted black on white. He seems to be happy to exist. I give him a little push and he starts rocking on the wooden base, back and forth, back and forth, as tall as my desk. The last few hours of what I wanted, a perfect silence in my studio. It's almost unbearable, and I want no more, really doesn't matter. I miss Fifina, I miss the children, I can listen to all the news I want, but I can no longer pretend, be under the illusion I'm still listening at war communiqués. There are no people to defend, no enemy to attack. The war is over, at least for me, for good.

Angelina

I drive to Troina in my 38-year-old, six-volt, cerulean-blue Volkswagen bug. I drive slowly, stop every few kilometers, get out from the car, take photos. This is the central, untouched part of Sicily. I feel it on my skin. People drive by, slow down, stare and check for my potential invitation to stop. I laugh, nothing has changed. I look like a tourist to be conquered, as in the old times. This is true: I am a tourist from the past, ready to go back to that past, with fear, hesitation and anticipation.

June. The fields of wheat, just harvested, move in and around. With incredible mauves, raw umber, burnt sienna, yellow ochres, in undulating graffiti lines, up and down the smooth, curved soil. Here and there a group of deep-green trees surround the stone-wall of a small farm, an isolated shed, a hamlet or a large *baglio*, with its gated-in courtyard still giving light to a massive abandoned farmhouse.

I leave the freeway, and start climbing up the winding, isolated road. No one in sight, when passing the detour sign to the train station. At the end of a hairpin bend I stop, fascinated. The isolated, spiky rocky mountain peak is almost unreachable, layered by small stone houses, each attached to the other, each facing the valley below, almost in wonder about their witnessed and frozen memories. The main church dominates, next to the arch-supported town square, at the very top of the town, ready to offer pleasure-giving evening strolls. This is Cerami, the sign tells me. I drive along the base of the mountain and there, in a flash, I see a tiny pointed black and white sign on the right side of the road, 'Canadian War Cemetery'—a totally unexpected sign I had forgotten about. 'I'll stop on the way back,' I think. I've seen this sign before, but I have never gone to the place, so I have no clue of what that means.

I drive through Gagliano Castelferrato, its houses clinging to the base of its inaccessible castle. This is the last town I cross, before reaching Troina, but the air is already fine and smells of purple sulla-hay flowers and cut wheat. It's a feast day, today, in Gagliano, and it's going to be a feast for the three coming days. People cling into small groups along the road, their dark festive clothes silhouetting against the sand-stone facades. For the town fair they come from all the farms around, riding beautiful horses.

Dark haired, those men wear blue velvet or wool jackets, thick solid boots, and, like Roman Emperors, crowns of fresh laurel leaves on their heads. I see them, trotting and bouncing rhythmically on their perfectly curried horses, the well-greased ornate saddles, on their way to the parade along the road from Troina.

In Troina I finally manage to reach my address, not knowing if people on the street are staring at me because of my tourist look, or because of my post-modern-looking beetle, or simply because I'm driving down, the wrong way on a one-way street. A group of teenagers, when I ask for directions, give me misleading ones, and I see them laughing, in my rear view mirror. I finally find the address, park, ring the bell, and wonder which one of the balconies above my head belongs to my cousin's apartment—a game I always played with my brother, when, as kids, we pretended not to know where we lived. Except now I don't know for real. Pina, my acquired cousin, welcomes me with a huge smile of all her front teeth. I catch my breath, and, my heart still pounding, try to return her smile and respond to her greetings. I've been back in Troina only once in many decades, and now I'm determined to reconnect to the people and the places of my childhood.

The view is incredible, after climbing another set of stairs to the penthouse deck off the kitchen. We are totally surrounded by mountains, layered with houses and churches. It looks like we are on a small peak in the center of the town.

I go back in the kitchen where Pina is busy with the espresso pot.

"How did you meet Puddu?" I ask her.

"I was working in Gagliano, and had a nice job, well paid."

"What were you doing?"

"I was sewing collars to shirts."

"…only collars?"

"Yes. I worked for Label, the big clothing company."

"And then?"

"Then he was looking for a wife, and someone told him of me, in Gagliano. So he came to the factory, and we met. He liked me. I liked him. We got married. God didn't give us any child."

"You are lucky to live in this place. It's so beautiful."

"Yes, but now I'm getting older, and my back is not as strong. I cannot carry groceries up four flights of stairs with no elevator," she tells me, massaging her back, while waiting for the espresso to finish bubbling. We take our hot espresso cups and go sit among the geraniums in the windy sun, on the pointed deck overlooking San Basilio square.

"This is not a good life for me, here in Troina. I hate living on the farm. When we got married, he promised he wouldn't go to the farm any more. So he opened a butcher shop off the street just down on the ground floor, but after a few years he had circulation problems in his legs. He couldn't stand up for the whole day behind the counter, so he decided to close the business, and go back to his farm. I ended up cooking and cleaning for him, his brother Ciccio, and the man working in the farm.

"So one day I decided I had enough, and came back to live in our house here in Troina. He gets up and leaves at five in the morning and comes back at nine, at ten, sometimes at eleven at night, every day, no exception for Sundays or holidays. But you know how stubborn he is, nothing can change his mind. The only things he sees are his animals, every day they need to be fed, every day they need to milked, he says, and that's all that counts for him. Not to mention when it's time for harvesting. What I need does not count. I'm alone the whole day; sometimes I see nobody for days. I'm from Gagliano, so I don't know many people here. I clean, I cook, I go to Vespers. Sometimes my brother, who is a doctor in the hospital, comes to visit me, and I cook lunch for him and we eat together.

"See here, downstairs, in the room you'll sleep in tonight, he hangs all the awards he got for his bulls and cows, at the town fairs. That's all that counts for him. And now, with my wicked back, it's hard for me even to go grocery shopping. I leave the bags in the corner of the entrance hall, on the ground floor, and he brings them up at night when he comes back from the farm."

I say to Pina, "You should ask him to give you a massage." "When he massages my back, he's too rough, so it doesn't help, and I get worse.

"This is where he sleeps, in this storage room, with the sewing machine, and the pile of washed laundry, and the ironing

board," Pina says when she gets up to show me around. "He says this room is cozy and warm. I sleep downstairs, in our master bedroom, furnished with so much care and money. When you make mistakes in your life, you cannot change things back.

"But let's go downstairs now, to make your bed."

"Pina, I'm not going to use the embroidered linens you placed in the bathroom downstairs. They are from your dowry, aren't they?" I say.

"Yes," she answers.

"They are so beautiful, but I don't want you to do so much work for me. You keep the house so tidy, and you, yourself, so perfectly in control. I can't believe how my stuff, spread allover the chairs when I arrived, has disappeared in no time into the closets."

"Well, I do what I can, I have nothing else."

After a while I ask about the other cousins.
"I want to see Filippina and Luigino. I have not seen them for at least 40 years. I wonder if I'll even recognize them."

"They'll come here to visit you, this afternoon. You'll meet Puddu tonight, when he comes back from the farm."

"I guess neither of them got married."

"Well, they didn't find the right person. They are getting older, now. They are in their seventies. Filippina has trouble with her eyes. She was a good seamstress, but now she can't see well anymore. They live together, brother and sister. He works in the farm, she keeps the house tidy."

"Could I phone them?"

"You know, they don't have a phone. I went yesterday to let them know you were coming. They have no car. He doesn't need it. He walks to the farm. They go to bed very early, so they have no TV." Wow! This is incredible, they reject technology even more than Mother Teresa! I can understand no phone and no car, but no TV! They must be incredible, I think.

When the bell rings, we both go to the door. Here they are, two old people, peasants, my cousins, strangers. Filippina comes in, first, staring at me with a huge smile on her large mouth, tilting her head slightly to one side; then suddenly steps forward and embraces me violently, her big aquiline nose, a reminder of my dad's, right next to my face, her green eyes

checking every single strand of hair on my head. Then suddenly, as soon as she had embraced me, she pushes me away, to stare at me from face to feet, her head now totally bent to one side, a smile spread all over her face. And then again, one step forward, she throws her arms around my neck, and my skin recognizes the same loving violence of many decades ago, the same passion that had scared my snobbish Mom away from her, and that I recognize in myself.
Luigino, calm and meek, still waits for his turn, a sweet smile on his incredible pale blue eyes of Norman descent.

In the den, they sit on two of the many chairs Pina has placed in a perfect row along the walls of the room, while Pina herself, separated by the door, sits on another chair against the adjacent wall. I sit on the sofa, my soft hide-away bed for tonight. My eyes, enchanted, go from one to the other, secretly trying to pick up details, and slowly recognizing them through my defrosting memories. I see the sunlight casting shadows over the creases of Filippina's purple T-shirt. Her straight skirt slides up her thighs and shows a pair of perfect legs that make me envious. She asks questions about my life, my husband, my sons, and then she slightly bends her head and stares at me, a light smile waiting for my answers. Luigino is small and bald on the front of his head like Dad was. He wears a pair of blue pants over solid thick black shoes, and a jacquard shirt the colours of his soil - burnt sienna, raw umber. His ears stick out. I see his reddish-pink skin become easily redder, when an emotion goes over his face. His eyes, now pale blue-green in the daylight, fill with tears when Pina asks me, "Ah! You had a brother! What was his name?"

And Luigino, quickly quickly, answers, "Cicì. His name was Cicì."
For a moment I hold my breath and smile within myself. 'Someone is living in the past more than me,' I think. I had forgotten his nickname. How could I have forgotten his nickname? My first playmate, my dear lost brother and friend. And his name was Cicì, short twittering sound of a bird, like the bird that had flown one day low, over our balcony and rested over the gutter. A long string tied to his leg had allowed us to take him prisoner. "Keep him, keep him. Let's keep him, Dad, please!" "But he will want to fly. He will be a prisoner and will die if he is not set free. And how is he going to feed himself, if he

cannot fly?" Dad had answered. "We'll give him food." "Like what?" "Milk?" "Birds don't drink milk. He will want to eat worms. He will die out of starvation." The next day he wasn't there anymore. "It has flown away,
he's free now," Dad said.

"And how did Cicì die?" asks Pina.

I open my mouth, but Luigino, his eyes filling with tears, his whole face turned red by the emotion, "A soccer ball on his chest," he says. I look at him not believing, remembering Dad's merciful lie. "He was playing soccer, and the ball hit him on his heart." Tears run along his cheeks, while he brings back the explanation of the tragic event that Dad had given his family; Luigino, the memory keeper, the Vestal of fire, had kept it.

"Ah, yes! I always said that soccer playing is dangerous." Pina comments, in her grey dress neatly pulled down to cover her thighs.

"Luigino, I want you to take me to the shack house."

"Which one?"

"The one behind the mountain. The one where we stayed in, during the War," I say.

"That's the one behind the Soccours Church," Luigino explains.

"You do remember!" Filippina exclaims, "You were so small! We were there with you!"

"What are you saying?" I ask.

"Don't you remember?. . .zia Filippa and me."

"No, I don't. Ah! So you saw it all happening. And you were older than me, you remember more." I sit on the edge of the sofa now, with a pile of questions in my mind, but I wait.

We negotiate. We could go tomorrow afternoon, on our way back from Puddu's farm, or Saturday morning, right before I leave. We decide it'll be on Saturday morning.

"At what time should we meet, at ten in the morning?" I ask. "At ten, Luigino does not leave the house anymore!" Filippina laughs.

"…eight?"

"…too late."

"…five?"

“Yes!” Luigino promptly agrees.

“No way! I wouldn’t dream of it!” I exclaim. The agreement is reached for seven in the morning.

“In half an hour we’ll be done.” Luigino concludes.

“No,” I answer, “I want to have time to sit down, to think, to remember."

Evening comes, they say goodbye and we go upstairs to the kitchen. Pina pulls out the dinner already cooked. I set the table. Night comes and Puddu arrives. I love his face—solid, intelligent, peaceful, stubborn—same as I remember from last time he came to visit us, many years ago. I see myself reflected in him and we both laugh, welcoming each other, him with his deep, deep voice full of energy and joy. I jokingly scold him for not paying enough attention to Pina. He promises, laughing, to come back home earlier in the evening; we both know it’ll not happen.

“I heard about aunt Fina, I’m so sorry. She was quite a lady. I remember once I came to visit you, and she served some deep fried chicken for lunch."

“I remember too,” as I also remember how annoyed I was at her insensitivity, as chicken at our table was to be eaten with fork and knife, and she knew Puddu wasn’t used to that; I also remember how he waited for her to start eating, observed and then imitated her.

“Pina, you should have seen how she carved the meat out from the bones, not a single bit left, all with fork and knife!"

“I also remember, Puddu, the wheel of pecorino cheese you brought us. It had little black-eyed white worms crawling all over, in and out from the fermentation holes, dripping fat, a sign of its goodness, Dad’s delight, Mom’s horror."

Next morning, we drive in my Beetle to the farm. Puddu, by then, has been up working for many hours. It’s harvesting day, today. I hear the threshing machine rumbling in the distance, I breathe the scent of freshly separated wheat, piled up in the warehouse where the truck returns to load it. When we arrive, Pina gets immediately busy in the kitchen. I take my camera and go down the field to the warehouse, looking for Puddu. I find him in one of the sheds, wearing a cone shaped hat with short brims for sun protection. He is sitting on his bamboo stool, milking his

sheep. I quietly open the gate and move in. In silence I watch him, and then I ask permission to take a photo.

"Only one, yes," he says quietly in a soft voice, without turning his head. I know the sheep get easily scared, and one flash may throw them into panic.

"Why do some of them have a blue chalk mark on their back?" I ask Puddu.

"These are the ones with milk." They all line up at the opening on the other end of the shed, where Puddu's brother, Ciccio, incites them to move in. Running up two steps, they find an opening on their right to go to the next room and then, again, another opening towards the light, through the exterior wall. The sheep, unaware bearers of the blue mark, are suddenly stopped by a three-fingered guillotine sash dropping on their neck with a metallic noise, released when Puddu pulls down a rod. When the milking is over, the guillotine is raised and the sheep runs away, free, to the light.

"Come, I'll show you the newborn," says Puddu.

"Why is this one crying all alone in this corner?"

"We have to feed this one with a syringe. It's too weak to stand up and too slow to feed with the others."

"Is he going to survive?"

"I think so."

Back to Troina, at night on the balcony, I see Puddu coming back home. It's eleven o'clock. He must be exhausted. I see him stopping at his old butcher shop, now used as storage, and come out from it with a wheel in his hands. I smile, and hope there aren't any worms crawling in and out from it, this time. The whole night I come in and out from dreams and memories. Tomorrow I'll see the place, tomorrow I'll know more.

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It was the end of spring of 1942, when, Mom went to talk to Angelina's father. Angelina was living with her family on the Vicolo Girato, the *stratuzza*, as they called the very short, narrow, unpaved road which started from Via Lungarini—larger, unpaved, and dusty as well—and ended at the wrought iron gate. That was the entrance to the Girato, our private magic garden, surrounded by a high stone wall that embraced Grandmother's

lemon orchards, extending down the hills of Casteldaccia.

Mom, all dressed up, crossed the garden gate, left me behind in the garden with grandmother, and disappeared for a long time into Angelina's house. It was the first time Mom was actually crossing the gate to go visit someone in the *stratuzza*. What I didn't know was that it had been arranged for Angelina to come with us to my Dad's hometown, Troina, up high on the mountains of Sicily. The War was continuing and Mom and Dad thought we would be much safer there than anywhere along the shores of Sicily.

Angelina was almost 13 years old at that time; I look now at her photo, the round stubborn peasant face, strong and yet delicate, her eyes looking straight, confident, open and curious at the same time. Since her mother's death, Angelina had been wearing black clothes, according to the strict Sicilian tradition, imposed even on very young people.

I imagine Angelina was very excited at the end of that spring in 1942. It was the first time she was leaving home, and she was going to leave for a very long time. But, deeply inside, she must have realized she was going alone—good-night kiss, Angelina, for the last time—leaving her dad behind, her two sisters, her home and the yellow lemons in the green orchards, and the sea so blue and warm—a dream to jump into, for the many long summer months.

The last details had been decided the evening before we left. She would come with us for one year, and the following summer she would go back home to Casteldaccia. The fact my dad was a school teacher and my mom belonged to the local noble family guaranteed Angelina's safety and the hope for a better future. The struggle for survival won her father's last resistance. Angelina would leave with us.

When Dad knocked at her green shutters to pick her up, I saw her dad holding her quietly. Then, with the sign of the Cross on her forehead, he and her sisters accompanied Angelina out of the door, along the *stratuzza,* and watched us to disappear down Via Lungarini; when I turned my head back I saw some women on the sidewalk watching us silently; my little brother Cicì on Angelina's arm, Dad carrying our luggage down to the station, two miles away.

I remember, when Dad lifted us up to the very high step of the train compartment, the surprise, the enchantment of seeing the small station in the new perspective at the window, the fast tin-tinning of the station bell alerting passengers, the panting of the locomotive, the whistling of the station-master after his slamming of the doors, one after the other, his head sliding, passing with no expression, under our window, same as the silent sliding of the train on the rails. Our attention was caught by the sudden realization that a new speeding-up noise was in the air, the ta-tam, ta-tam of the wheels jumping over the short rails, and, to this crescendo of noise, the flowers of the station garden ran away. And lastly, while the train was gaining power and speed, we had a last glimpse of Angelina's elementary teacher's home: Villa Biondolillo. A small metal staircase reached a terraced garden, almost caressing and barely touching the concrete buttresses. The station square vanished from view, with its very irregular sandy shape. We waived goodbye to its flowering vines, spreading as a mantle on the retaining walls of the station garden; it was the same space where we had to jump aside to let the horse carriage go by, with its black hood up, passing in a cloud of dust, the horse running along the steep hill, the horseman yelling and cracking his whip high in the air.

Once more, I guess, curiosity won over Angelina's sadness, and she joined us in fast and excited chatter about everything that was happening. It was the third time she was going on a train, she told us. This was a local, very slow train, stopping at every small station, huffing at every hill. The coal engine was throwing tons of vapor and coal dust on our faces, the smoke burning eyes and nose, in response to our irresistible pleasure of putting our faces out of the window, against the wind and the movement. The train was gaining speed, now. I saw Angelina catching the last glimpse of the purple bougainvillea and the clusters of blue plumbaco flowers, and, for a moment, fill her eyes with tears. She then sat, exhausted, her eyes focusing on the sign above the seat in front of her, her head dancing at the rhythm of the train, her hands quietly resting on her knees. No definite thoughts, I imagine, but a sense of emptiness in her stomach, a desire to go back. But she did not move.

The train ran fast, our heads pushed and pulled left and right by the wind-rocked wagon. With a long, low whistle we

entered a tunnel and left daylight behind. Suddenly blind, I stared at the purple-blue night light on the ceiling, while the wind brought-in the acrid smoke of the carbon-running locomotive, and ears felt plugged-up by the noise. Someone got up and quickly shut the window, the noise now muffled. I leaned my head on Angelina's lap. She caressed my hair, a delicate long caress. She had never done it before. I was surprised and didn't move for fear she would stop. Another long whistle announced the end of the tunnel and the coming of the light. "Maria, sit straight," Mom said, from the seat across mine. I sat up. Angelina smiled at me. I closed my eyes.

***

It was December 25th, 1942. We had been living in Troina since the summer. "You are one year older, today," Mom explained, tenderly kissing me. I looked around the room and saw no difference anywhere. It was also Christmas day, that day, and I knew it was a special day, because there was a cloud of incense burning in Church, the priest wearing gold embroidered white garments, and singing Tantum Ergo Sacramentum with a loud voice. So I pretended to sing along with people, going 'laa...la-la' as loud as I could, and stopped when everyone else stopped. And then, outside the Church, people kissed each other on both cheeks, and said *Buon Natale*. The snow, frozen up during the night, made our walking slippery up the stone steps, back from the Church. I held tight on Angelina's hand and my legs did not deepen into the snow anymore, now, as the snow had turned into ice. Frostbites made it hard in the evening to take out our socks and, in order to peel them off, Angelina had to wet our crusts with lukewarm water.

That Christmas morning we heard Dad telling Mom how lucky we were, having moved up to the mountains, as news of fierce fighting scared everyone. We were also lucky, for having plenty of milk, eggs, olives, chickpeas, and wheat to make our own bread. Once a week, Angelina helped Mom load wood in the brick oven up in the attic, while the dough, wrapped in an immaculate sheet, was left to rise placed under the blanket in one of our beds. On those days we were allowed to go upstairs, and without touching anything, explore all the dark corners of the kitchen, stuffy with old smoke from the coal cooking pits: the

homemade salami and ham hanging down from old square nails sticking out from the dark wood beams; the pots black from fire; the large brass boiler used to heat water for our baths, once a week. We would then stand in front of the oven, watching the flames twirling with fantastic orange and blue and green colours, and then wait for the flat focaccia bread, placed right in front of the oven opening, to swell and bubble up, twisting away from the flames. Other times we would watch Angelina feed the coffee roaster pot with raw coffee beans through the tiny opening of the pot lid, and then she would allow us to turn its handle, secretly from Mom, while the coffee, roasting on the fire, filled the room with its fragrance.

I remember now how joyous and playful Angelina was with us, pretending to be our age, and not the 13-year-old she was. We felt much loved and understood, and ended not being able to imagine our life without her. Angelina was willing to hide our little secrets and fill our days with delight, at a time when we had no toys, except for the coloured tiny round seeds or stones found while mounding wheat, spread out on our dining table. Placed on the floor in rows, they would become walls, buildings, pyramids, roads along which our fingers travelled. Angelina turned our long winter evenings into word games, imagined adventures, and Sicilian storytelling.

Dad and Morn felt safe on the mountains of Sicily at that time, and yet the twist in our future was not far away, only a few months into summer. The radio news spread by word of mouth, and Angelina picked up rumors at the Church in the morning, or Dad, when he was with us, at the barbershop or in one of the many *Circolo* clubs, where men sat and talked men's talk all day long. This was life, real life for us. There was no other way, of living, as our memory didn't go back too far; there was no questioning, or wanting toys, but just desire, enormous desire to learn, to experience, to be alive. It felt safe to be close to Mom and Dad. War was a word that had not touched us yet, other than when listening to the conversations of grownups, or by its sound, when airplanes crossed high in the sky, and Dad explained those were war airplanes, called bombers. Much later I discovered there were also other kind of planes, beside the bombers we were familiar with, their many skeletal carcasses we had examined

with excitement during summer, going through the Reggio Military Airport, on our way to the beach. Three years later, in 1947, Mom wanted to visit her mother in Casteldaccia, first time after the war. The director of the Reggio new civil ex-military airport, for us *Signor Valentino*, offered to fly Mom and us children back home on the test flight of the twin engine DC3, departing from the airport. Mom chickened out, as there were no seats and secured doors installed yet on the plane.

Every evening, I remember, Mom's fingers curled up my single white silk ribbon she used for my hair. Then she placed it flat under one of the mattresses, so it would be pressed down by morning, as there was no electricity in the house, and ironing was done only with hot coals burning in the iron. Angelina would then comb my long, curly hair, a safe and painless operation when done by her hands; then she would tenderly pull my hair back with the renewed white silk ribbon, dug out from under the mattress, almost granting me a symbol of feminine lightness, regardless of the war outside.

We lived in a room with a small balcony. The balcony was our delight, our narrow and small connection to the world. We spent hours outside, playing on it or simply looking out at anything we could look at. And we dreamed. Sometimes, after Angelina washed our hair, we dried it in the sun, the wind in our hair bringing a smell of hay. In winter, we stayed behind the small wooden balcony doors, enjoying the winter sun, my hands playing with the frost and the vapor on the glass.

One morning, right after Dad had kissed us goodbye to return to Reggio, the city where he was teaching, Angelina took us out earlier than usual for our morning walk. As soon as we went out of the door, she asked, "Do you want to surprise Dad? Do you want to go and meet him at the taxi?"

"Wouldn't Mom get angry?" I asked, excited and enthusiastic, hopping down the stone steps of the narrow street with a firm grip on Angelina's hand.

"It'll be our secret," she replied. But we both knew Mom was going to read the truth on our faces.

The taxi was parked on the side of San Basilio Square, where the driver and other men were saying goodbye to Dad with a last cup of espresso coffee. When he saw us, he was delighted.

"Can we go inside the car?" we asked.

"Yes," he said and he walked to the car to open the doors. We got in, Cicì in the front, I in the back. The burgundy velvet seat was soft on my hands. I looked out. People, doors, dogs, everything looked like it was framed by the window, like in a photograph. I had never been inside a car before, only on a bus and the bus didn't make that scary noise the car made when it skidded away.

"Are you coming out?" Francesco asked, after having examined and tested all, the chrome knobs on the mahogany dashboard, "I'm going out".

"No, I'm staying," I answered, "Don't tell anyone I'm still here." 'It's dark inside here, no one will see me if I hide,' I thought, and stayed a long time kneeling on the floor, my face on the velvet and my eyes closed to make myself even more invisible. Dad opened the door and I thought, 'This is the moment, Dad will sit on the front seat. He won't see me. When he does, we will be so far on our way to Catania that the taxi will not turn back and I'll stay with him, me and him.' Then I felt his hand touching my hair, with a soft caress and, "Maria, now it's time for me to go," he said. He lifted me out from the car and high above his head, and then kissed my eyes. Angelina held my hand, staying still for a long time, until the car slowly disappeared around the curve, with no noise.

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Then suddenly one day, news turned more alarming. Today I understand how voices of Allies disembarking along the shores of Sicily must have made Dad feel less safe on the mountains. Until then, no one had thought the War would actually move down to Sicily. When he heard about the Allies chasing the enemy up the mountains near Troina, he feared they would bomb Troina too. So he looked for a new way to protect us and decided to move to a country shack in a field uncle Ignazio owned, near Troina.

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"Can I take Maria with me?" Angelina asked Mom that morning. "No, or the two of you will start playing with the farmer's daughter at the farm and you won't come back." Of

course I was dying to go and play with the girls. Why would Mom always spoil our fun? But Mom was inflexible. “It’s too dangerous, these days. I want you to go and bring back the baker’s shovel right away. Be sure to go and come back right away. Remember to comeback…” Angelina left alone.

The only plane came down in the morning very low over our heads and when its tail had just disappeared between the leaves of our almond trees, a single deflagration shook the day. After that, it was only the sound of the engine flying away leaving silence behind; even the cicadas had stopped their noise, leaving us in the deepest silence, I remember.

Angelina did not come back. The whole day we waited, hiding and locked in the shack house for fear of more bombing.

When night came, and not even the dimmest light was left in the sky, “Professore Rizzo, Professore Rizzo!” we heard desperate voices calling Dad’s name. Mom, pressing her hands over her head, “Oh, my Jesus! What has happened?” cried, circling the room around the table. She blew out the candle as Dad opened the door and went out in the night. We had waited for Angelina to come back from the farmer’s house, barricaded in the shack, for fear that they would come back if they spotted us, and bomb our shack too. We had waited for the whole day, from the moment the bomb had blasted that August morning, not many meters away.

Late in the night Angelina was back. With Cicì standing on the chair, we took turns, silently, at the keyhole of our bedroom door, in the room where they had locked us. Dad and the farmer’s son brought in Angelina, deeply asleep. They had apparently carried her up the hill through the vineyards and then they placed her, still sleeping, on her bed in the corner of the first room. The man was telling Mom his story excitedly, but whispering at the same time. Why was Angelina still sleeping, with all the confusion around her, and, above all, why had she been so late coming back so that Dad had to go out looking for her in the night, worrying everyone? That was an unclear story, I thought.

Then they left Angelina alone on her bed, in the farthest corner of the room, the candle lit again, placed on the chair next to her bed, her white linen seemed to breathe at the dancing of the candle flame shadows. Dad, the shovel on his hand, returned

outside, with Mom this time. We could not get a clue of what was happening, and why we were allowed to stay up, still locked in the second room and awake at that hour, long after Angelina herself had gone to sleep.

When we got up next morning, Angelina was not in and nowhere around. "Where is Angelina, Dad?" I asked.

"She is gone."

"When is she coming back?"

"She is not coming back."

"Why?"

"Because she is dead."

"Dead? What does it mean, 'dead'?"

"Yesterday, the bomb killed her."

"What does it mean, 'killed her'?"

"It means she cannot move any more, and she cannot talk." Ah! That made some sense. "You mean she is sleeping, then. When is she going to wake up?"

"…sort of sleeping, in a way," Dad murmured, "…but she won't wake up anymore."

"Ah! And where is she now?" Dad did not answer that question. I followed his eyes to the heap of fresh soil in the field, between the house and the vines, and did not dare ask any more questions. When Mom said, "Stay away from that field, go play somewhere else," I knew she was there, but no one wanted to tell me.

While it was still early in the morning, I remember, Dad hurried us back to Troina, but as soon as we started walking up on the mule trail, we were stopped by a caravan of men with their families and their mules coming down towards us on the path.

"Where are you going?" they asked.

"To Troina," Dad replied.

"Didn't you hear the news? The Allies are coming up these mountains. They were bombing like crazy yesterday in Cerami, the whole day, from morning to night."

"Yes, we heard bombing yesterday, like a continuous thunder in the sky," Dad replied.

"They are only a few kilometers away, and they say they are coming to Troina, too. Everyone is running away from Troina. It would be crazy for all of you to go back now."

"Where do we go, now?" Dad asked himself, disoriented.

They said, “Come with us We are going to the farm down the river.”

“Oh, no thank you,” Mom said politely, “You are already so many!”

“This is no time for compliments,” they replied. Someone lifted me up in the air and then I landed inside a deep wicker basket, *u cartidduni*, hanging down from mule; Cicì voiced something very excitedly from the other side of the mule. So we went; left Angelina behind.

Much later on, I learned that Dad went back one year later to the field next to the shack to retrieve Angelina. He found only her bones, hair and bits of the white linen turned the colour of the earth. He dug her out, loaded a mule and took her down to the cemetery, on the other side of the town. When we went back looking for her, years later, they told us she had been placed in a common grave.

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The whole night, now, I come in and out from dreams and memories. I know there is more coming to me. Tomorrow I’ll see the place. Tomorrow I’ll know more.

At 6:30 am, Pina wakes me up. While the air fills with the aroma of the morning espresso, I go out on the deck—the cool air on my skin, a morning mist suspended half way through the mountain and the houses layered on the side—and I shoot another roll of film in this different cool light. At 7:05, the bell rings, and I run five stairs down to meet Luigino and Filippina. Leaning out from her master bedroom balcony, Pina waves us goodbye.

Filippina this morning wears a silk satin shirt of a splendid emerald green, made out of two different materials and shades of green, sewn together with laces and buttons, a bit tight for her large bosom, evidently pulled out for the occasion from a fifty-year-old wardrobe. The gorgeous colours she wears, the secret splendour in her eyes make me imagine her inner life—a life not lived, but only dreamed and, as all things dreamed and not lived, of splendid perfection and freedom. She kisses me again with the same passion as yesterday and it feels as if she has found a lost jewel in me. Luigino carries an old leather school bag, the type he would have used when he was a kid, also dug out for the occasion. I’m curious to find what he may need to carry to

the farm this morning.

"We could walk. It's not too far. But if we go by car, I warn you, there is a steep slope, so on the way back, we'll have to go by a longer road. The place is called *Imbiancato*, the Lime Washed Place, I don't know why. It's right behind the Soccours Church." I know it's only a minute drive, but I feel more comfortable accessing this portal with my car rather than on my feet. I feel more protected, more grounded. And these two people, strangers no more, so related and so recognizable in part of me, are now about to help.

"This is the place I tried to find years ago, and could not," I tell them. "That day, I ended up jumping over a barbwire fence in a field down the valley. I don't remember all these fences cutting fields when we lived here. I remember we could walk freely from one field to the other. Now I see barbwire fences all over."

"We are poor, and yet people come and steal, and make damages, so we have to protect ourselves. But most of these are also to keep the animals in."

"I remember after I jumped the fence that day, I was attacked by three small but fierce farm dogs who suddenly jumped out at me from behind a shack where they had been left to guard. Nobody was around, except my husband and our three-year-old son watching from the top of a hill, two hundred meters away, too far to do anything. The dogs circled me, barking, and one bit my ankle from behind. So, hoping they could not smell my fear, I started yelling at them as loud as they were barking and told them how mean they were for attacking me, and that they should be ashamed, as I just wanted to find the place where I had stayed as a little girl."

"And then...?"

"They must have thought I was barking louder than them, because they started backing up slowly. So, I too backed up slowly towards the fence and got out."

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I park on an enlargement of the narrow gravel road, get out from the car, lock it, and we start walking up, along the steep narrow path. Luigino goes first, the school bag in his hand. He puts it down, delicately, against the fence, opens the barbwire

gate, lets us go by, picks up the school bag, closes the gate and reaches us walking up the hill, towards a small lime-washed building.

"We made little changes, here. See, the gutter line with the clay tiles is new," Luigino explains.

I walk slowly across the flat little area in front of the house, go to the side, and walk up the slope behind it, until I find myself higher than the roof, among airy almond trees.

"This is where the robbers came in, through the roof, and stole Mom's jewelry," I tell Filippina, who has followed me, skipping slippery thorny bushes up the slope. "She was always carrying her *valigetta*, but the people from the caravan convinced her to leave it behind, the morning we ran away to the farm down the river." There is a sense of lightness in me, as images buried almost sixty years ago merge with the physical image of this moment.

I go back to the front of the house. I see three doors. I choose to enter the first one on the left. "This is the room where we ate." I remember, looking around, the lime-washed walls extended to the inside of the small room. "Angelina's bed was in that corner. And here was the door to the next room where we slept. But where is the door now?" I ask Luigino.

"I used it to open the second room to the yard." I slide my hand on the rough wall, looking for a sign of the door that had been there, a sign of the keyhole that had connected us to the first room that night.

"Do you remember aunt Filippa?" Filippina asks

"Yes," I reply. "She was killing worms growing in the stomachs of young children by rubbing garlic on their tummies, while saying the Holy Rosary."

"Yes, you really remember!" Filippina laughs. "One day your Dad came to Troina and took me and the very old aunt Filippa and brought us here to escape the bombing. We slept in this first room with Angelina."

"I had forgotten about this."

"But that night, when Angelina died, we slept with you in the second room."

"Next is the oven room," Luigino shows me. "See, in that little brick oven, your mother baked the bread to give you food."

We go out again. Attached to the right side of the house is a shed. “We built this wood shed after the War,” Luigino tells me. I stop. The heap of fresh soil, in the field between the house and the vines overlaps the image of the shed.

“This is where Dad buried Angelina that night. Right here, under this wood,” I say. But the more I look, the more the heap of fresh soil fades back in my memory.

“The well, where is the well?” I ask now.

“It’s down there, some hundred meters down the hill, half way between here and the Romano farm, or the *Russu,* ‘The red hair’ as they called him. That is the farm where Angelina was killed.” We head down to the well.

“I planted vines on this side,” Luigino shows me. “It’s hard life. Before, I was doing the work by myself, but the clay is hard and unforgiving under the hoe and the mattock. So now I call somebody; and pay a lot of money for each day he works here. This is the only way to go for me, now.” Filippina listens intensely and nods. They stop at the well. Luigino lifts the metal door on top of the well. There is a small bucket tied with a long rope to the door handle. He picks up the bucket and throws it down the well. I look inside, until I hear the splash and see black circles of water breaking the surface. Then he pulls the bucket back, full of fresh water. He offers me the bucket. I drink. Memories, more memories flicker. I turn around and look at the little shack on the hill, the mountain cutting the sky on its back, the same way I looked at it in the summer of '43.

“That morning,” Filippina tells me, “we were all playing right next to this well—Angelina, Cicì, you, and me. We were playing. The plane came right over our heads. Made a big circle in the sky and came back again. ‘For me, they are coming for me,’ Angelina said, ‘this is why they persecute us, they torture us. Quickly, lay flat on the ground, quickly,’ and so we laid down on the dry grass. The plane came back low, low over our heads again, and then it flew away. He, the pilot, was laughing and waving his hand.”

“Maybe it wasn’t that same plane later on...”

“Maybe not, but it was the only plane that flew in our sky that whole day. I have no doubt it was the same one, the only plane. After his last glide down, he flew away.

“Your parents yelled, ‘Come, come back home, impudent,

come,' and we went back home, and they were terrified, and we all went inside and shut the door. After a while your mom told Angelina, 'Go to the *Russu* to borrow his baker's shovel.' The bread your mom made was the only food she had to feed everyone in the house. There was a little girl at the *Russu* farm, the daughter of the farmer, I don't remember her name. Angelina and her would often embrace each other, and they would play on the stone bench in the court. 'I'll do your braids,' Angelina would say, and they would laugh and hug each other."

The girl's grandmother was *sfilannu* noodles on the kitchen table, pressing the dough with the lasagna maker. Grandma, who was deaf, said 'Oh! The kids are dancing again on the roof tiles! They'll break the tiles, sooner or later.' But when the vibration intensified to a huge sound, the farmer ran out, to see in one moment the two girls, still hugging each other, one hit in the head, the other in the heart, and his leg, hit by a fragment of the exploded bomb, snapped and cast away.

"That night we saw. Angelina from the bedroom door key hole. They lit a little candle, *a cannilieddа*. Your dad Silvestro left the three of us—you, me and Cicì—in the bedroom, with aunt Filippa, then they went out to help at the farmer's house. We all called, 'Angelina, Angelina, wake up,' and took turns looking at her through the key hole."

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We walk down the path now and stop at the barbed wire fence protecting the rebuilt *Russu* farm, the three of us, a little strange procession, walking back to 60 years ago—nobody would imagine *that* by seeing us. "This is the place." Filippina murmurs, "This is the place where Angelina and the farmer's girl sat, on a stone bench on this side of the threshing floor."

I wish these stones could remember, this soil would still shake at the blasting, and stop still at the silenced hearts. I wait there, and find no answer.

We go back up the hill. "Let's stay here for a while, next to the house," I say. Out from the shed, Luigino brings three bamboo stools for us to sit down. Looking for the shade offered by an almond tree, we end up sitting on the low stone wall where black ants had worked the whole morning.

"I want to taste these almonds," I say, recognizing the old

tree in front of the house. Luigino picks only five of them.

"They are not ripe, yet. They are still milky inside," he says. But I like them, anyway. Now Luigino goes back inside the house, and comes out with his school bag, he had left in the first room of the shack. He places it delicately on the stone wall; releases the lock on one side of the bag, then the lock on the other side, lifts the flap, puts his hand inside, pulls out a tray. He unwraps it and, "Take one," he tells me.

"But this is an enormous cookie for me," I say. "Aren't you going to have some?"

"They are all yours," Filippina smiles.

Then he pulls out from the bag a small glass jar filled with coffee, and unwraps a mini, used, plastic espresso cup. He pours some coffee, and offers me the cup. I close my eyes and drink from it, cold, sweet, and watery.

"More?"

"No, thanks I can't drink much coffee," I lie.
The sun is rising higher. The mountain across the torrent in the valley is clear and looks closer to us.

"There, do you see that isolated tree in that field. That's Buscemi," tells me Luigino, "I was there with my dad that morning and we saw everything. We saw the plane coming down over the shack. We watched it circling the sky, like a vulture, lower and lower, and then turn away. Then it came back and we heard the blast. We ran across, left the mules behind, and ran through the fields, the river, up on this side, crying all the time, because we knew we were going to find everyone dead." His eyes redden and fill with tears, again.

"I remember next morning we left for the big farm, down the torrent," I say. "The caravan of people coming from Troina took us with them."

"That was the Parmigiano house, and the place was called Marchelli." Luigino explains. "No, I can't take you there. The house was sold, and I don't like… I'm afraid of the people that are there now."

"We stayed in the house, down the river maybe for a very few days," I recall. "…many, many families together. I would say thirty people, if not more. I imagine most of them slept on the floor, and ate any food they could find in the house, left by the rats. The most shocking memory I have of those days is peeing

while sitting on one of those tall ceramic vases they called *u cantaru,* poo floating in pee up to the brim, stinky, and I was afraid to slide in, accidentally.

"After a while," I continue, "people were looking for a safer place, and we all ended moving to a cave in the middle of the dried-up torrent. It was a huge cave, so big that people could stand up on the sandy floor. I guess the winter erosion had removed all the soil from underneath."

"Yes," Luigino adds, "they told me there was a rock in the middle of the dried-up riverbed, but I wasn't able to find it when I went looking for it, much later on, after the end of the war."

"The rushing winter water must have filled the cave with soil again," I say.

"I remember Mom couldn't stand the smell of so many peasants that had not washed themselves for weeks, and to be so close to them. So, she found herself a private niche under a low flat rock, an outbuilding from the main cave, where, after having removed the larger pebbles, sliding in, she could sit up on the sandy floor, and there she settled with her family. Cicì and I could stand up, almost touching the rock over our heads and we were allowed to go out for little tours.

"One day I discovered I knew the days of the week in a row, non-stop, no mistakes, as Angelina had been teaching me, and I wished I could now show off to her.

"Then one morning everyone got out from the cave, and people started shouting, and singing, and dancing like crazy. Dad was shaving, his face in a small mirror, hanging from a branch of an almond tree, the shaving foam as white as snow, the razor blade flashing high in the air: 'The Allies are coming!' people exulted, waving their hands. 'Here they are. Look!'

"And soon, I saw a long, loose line of soldiers advancing, along the riverbank a few yards away, to the path for Troina, smiling, sending kisses back on the tips of their hands, throwing cigarette packs, chewing gums, Am-Lire bills. The Heroes."

But among them, maybe still flying high in the sky, there was a man, a young man smiling at four children playing at the edge of a well, waving his hand, the same hand pressing a button…no martial court for him, all paid for, all included; a no-

name killer.

***

I'm driving back home. It's noon, hot burning sun. Time for lunch with fresh Troina bread that Puddu bought from the baker this morning at six before going to the farm. I'm taking home his wheel of pecorino cheese, and two cases of small, scented mountain peaches. Just past Cerami, I see the station detour sign and remember. I invert the car and, at the other end of Cerami, there it is, the small sign I had seen on my way to Troina: Canadian War Cemetery. I turn right at the arrow; on a narrow winding road through fields of poppies and more poppies mixed with ripe wheat. I stop. I ask.

"I don't know if they are still there," the old fellow I approach in the semi-abandoned farm answers me. "I think they may have been taken away. I think the place was that way, about two hundred meters from here." I turn the car, and drive slowly back.

I ask myself, what do you expect out of an abandoned graveyard? It may not even be there, and obviously nobody cares about them, here. It's past history, past generations.

A tiny blue sign tells me to take a left on a fork, a narrow unpaved road to a parking lot up the hill, in the middle of nowhere, no one in sight. With hesitation, looking back over my shoulders, I get out from the car, go up the few steps, and soon forget about my worries.

I am in front of a terraced hill, green grass as only in Canada, only in Vancouver, only in Granville Island facing False Creek, can exist. The sign has confirmed this is a Canadian War Cemetery, set and maintained by the Commonwealth. There is a mausoleum on my right. Inside, a plaque retells me the history of those Cerami hot days.

What is a tabernacle doing here, I ask myself. I go close, touch it, turn the key, open its little painted wooden door. There is a book inside. The list goes on for pages, with the name of each of them, the people. There is another book, a guest book. I open it and read the names of people that have detoured from their way to pay homage, people from all over the world, people that have chosen what to look for.

I go out in the sun and start climbing up the hill. Rows

and rows of blooming flowers and headstones comb the hill, on left and right, all the way to the top; then disappear on the other side, where the view opens up to the valley below in a quiet time, except for birds circling the sky.

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July 22nd 1943, 22nd, 28th, 28th, 24th, 25th, 25th, 25th, 24th, 24th, 25th, 25th, 25th, 25th, 25th, 26th, 26th, 28th, le 31 Juillet, 26th, 26th, 28th, 27th, 27th, 17th, 13th, 17th, 16th,14th, 14th, 26th, 28th, 27th, 17th, 13th, 17th, 16th, 14th, 15th, 31st, August 2nd, July 31st, le 27 Juillet, le 27 Juillet, August 1st, 4th, 1st, July 30th, 28th, 11th, August 17th, 3rd, 3rd, 3rd, 2nd, 17th, 17th, 12th, 22nd, 25th, 17th, November 19th 1942, May 17th 1944, July 15th 1943, November 25th, July 14th, April 29th, September 9th

age 23
age 25
age 23

F T. Wagstaff, The Loyal Edmonton Regiment
R. Robertson, The Royal Canadian Regiment, age 38

Greater love
hath no man than this,
than man lay down
his life for his friends

E. Myers, The Three Rivers Regiment, age 39
N. McCormack, 48th Highlanders of Canada, age 36
L. Brimacombe, the Loyal Edmonton Regiment, age 25

Warm Summer Sun
Shine Kindly Here
Good-night, brave heart,
Good-night

age 22
age 31

G. W. Bryant, Carleton and York Regiment, age 29

The Lord is my Shepherd
I shall not want

K.A. Gray, West Nova Scotia Regiment, age 25
R. Cloutier, Royal 22e Regiment
J.V. P. R. Fiset, Royal 22e Regiment

Mort au Champ d'Honneur
pour son Pays

R. J. La Pointe, Charleton and York Regiment
Corporal Cyril Clayton Craney, The Loyal Edmonton Regiment, age 27
K. J. Earn Shaw, The Royal Canadian Regiment, age 21
N. W. Right, The Three Rivers Regiment, age 20
Lieutenant J. S. T De Balinhard, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, age 33
G. J. Jack, Royal Canadian Artillery, age 48
J Strackhouse, Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps, age 27

Servant of God, well done;
thy Glorious Warfare's past
the battle 'sfought
the victory won
and thou art crowned at last

G. A. Romanof, The Third Loyal Edmonton Regiment, age 25
E. B, Rhind, The Third Loyal Edmonton Regiment, The Second Loyal Edmonton Regiment, age 32

A Soldier
of the
Second World War
a Canadian Regiment
Known unto God

W. S. Mac Gregor, The Tree Rivers Regiment, age 20

here lies a brave soldier
and a dearly beloved son.
Rest in peace, dear Bill

J. F. Stevens, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry

until the day break
and the shadows flee
away in loving memory
of a dear son

J.H. Weymark, The Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment, age 19
Gunner W. G. Rosenthal, Royal Canadian Artillery, age 25
Trouper A. R. Poulton, The Royal Canadian Dragons, age 18
Warrant Officer Class II J. Fearnside, Pilot, R.C. Air Force, age 22
Pilot Officer J.W. Clark, Navigator / Bomber, R.C.Air Force, age 22
Trooper E.J. Lloyd, The Tree Rivers Regiment, age 20
Flying Officer A. E. Shaw, Wireless Operator/Air Gunner, R.C.A.F., age 21

in loving memory
of our dear son 'Tubby'
who gave his life
for freedom

Warrant Officer II J. J. Kunz, navigator, R.C. Air Force, age 23
Warrant Officer II R. M. Westman, pilot, R.C. Air Force, age 41
Gunner J. Hughes, R. C. Artillery, age 41

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Until I get dizzy and the blue sky rotates together with the ground. Then I lay down on the edge of the low stone wall, under the shade of an oak tree. Black ants carelessly walk over my legs. I have learned something, I have learned nothing.

***

In the middle of a piece of paper I draw a circle. I write a word inside the circle. I write chunks of words coming out from the circle, wrapping around like long hair strands.

what did it mean hearing Mom to say “it wasn’t my fault” to Angelina’s father.
what did it mean hearing Angelina’s father, “why did you send Angelina alone, why didn’t you send your daughter with her”
what did it mean to wake up every morning in fear at the factory whistle at 7:30
sounding like an incursion alarm
what did it mean to play with empty bomb shells found in the orchard in Reggio Calabria
what did it mean to look at coloured posters on the walls of the elementary school so to recognize all the shapes, sizes, colours of gun shells, unexploded bombs buried like potatoes in the fields, waiting for the children to spot and dig them out so to play their last game with their fascinating shapes

had I gone with her, “Mom said come back right away”
had I gone with her, “Mom said don’t stop and play at the farm”
had I gone with her, “Mom said...”

what did it mean to wear a mask to play
to breathe through
a war mask
stinky air
through
the moss-green heavy
cold rubber too big
for a child’s face
the long cylinder, for the nose
the rubber black cross to hold
filters in place
the round glasses too distant to fit small eyes
but the world looked greenish through those glasses
green and distant
wearing that mask to play
heavy
like a python skin on the neck

What it meant
to remember
remember a white shirt
and a red scarf
surfing the sky
with a smile
waving a hand and flying away
flying away to come back

oh what a power that guy had
leaving a child
playing alone.

My Clearest Memories [*]

My clearest memories of the summer '43
brings me back to those painful days
when people didn't know if they were
going to be alive the next day, if
they were going to have food or
even a roof over their heads.
For us children it was different.
Reality was a reflection on our parents
faces, a light changing colour and
intensity, same we see today in
the theatre or on a…
I was four and a half
my brother was 2 and half, but we were
exposed to the most excruciating experience,
first line, during the allied bombing
in war to Germans retreating on the mountains
of Sicily. It had not been expected
that they would end in Troina.
Nor the town had expected to receive
a gold cross for its humanitarian
response to the German retreating army.

There was no smile on our parents
faces. Talking was with soft and sad
only-when-necessary voice for practical
reasons, no comments, no jokes, no aliveness
in the tone.
Angelina [was already] gone away from
our lives. For us children there was
no questioning, no possible explanation
just a fact. We had no other life experience
to compare to, [so] reality was our only experience,
no memories to help us to make sense
[of] about things that were happening.
Angelina gone: our nanny, our first friend, gentle,
patient, a little naughty at times, to

[*] Transcribed by Riccardo from Maria's handwritten draft.

give us freedom, to protect us from
Mom's rigid instructions.
I don't remember if she slept
in the first room of our place in Troina
or upstairs where there was
the stove and the wood burning oven.
Then the decision to move to the little farm house
as Mom and Dad felt we were going to be safer
than in the town, the town of Cerami being heavily
bombed. Then the bomb aiming Angelina
almost following her from the well to the
farm shed and finally reaching her in
the farm house. "Professore Rizzo, Professore Rizzo" the voice
in the night, a voice not visible in the
dark night, preceding the [man and his]
message of death.
Today, as adult, I look at the pain my mother had to suffer
with two very young children.
I remember mom would make the bread
in the wood burning oven, in the dark
kitchen, coal would attract rats and
cockroaches. One evening, I was sleeping
at the feet of the bed, awaken by some one
chewing my toes. So I wake up Dad,
sleeping next to me, in the same bed,
the four of us, Dad said, No, Maria, you were
dreaming, and went back to sleep. More
chewing of the toes helped me call Dad
again an sure enough a small rat
came out from the blankets, running away
on the floor at the dim light of
a candle Dad was holding in his hand.
Bread and a soft boiled egg was our evening
meal. The shell broken, and kept I suppose,
in lemon (vinegar) would dissolve to become
our calcium intake.
Round colored seeds sorted out from our wheat
supply was to be used as precious
material to build an infinite of castle
and fences on the floor slab of our

balcony. This was our outlook into
the world. *Armistizio* had been a
sweet word in the mouth of our parents.
Mom, what does *armistizio* mean? That
there is no more bombing. As simple as that.
The voice of Marlene Dietrick still echoed
a little longer *tutte le sere sotto quel*
fanal ti stavo ad aspettar.
The black purse that had
belonged to Angelina. We looked inside,
very quickly. It had to be returned
to her parents after war would end.
A handkerchief bordered in black, a
wallet, a rosary. A life folded up.
An embarrassing question, why everyone else
was alive. Only Angelina dead.
Oh…because…any explanation
would explain nothing. The
fact was a fact. It made sense
to us children because we would try
to make sense.
One year later in Ravagnese we were
awaken every morning by the loud
siren of a factory. But that sound
in our mind was no different from
the incursion raids and identified
with fear. The fear that airplanes
would fly to throw bombs on us.
Come bombing on us.
Very simple, *sirene* = airplane bombing
[mathematical equation].

When I was […] years old we lived
in Ravagnese, next to the military
airport. That was my world at that
time. The *sirene* at 7:30 every morning
woke me up not for an air raid incursion

not to fear, not to hide in safer place underground
warning, Mom are planes arriving to bomb
us no dear not anymore that is the call
to work in the *fabrica*. Or to go to school
for us children. Fresh in my memory
right after the armistice the return to
school in Troina, at the nuns' convent.
A bomb had destroyed the roof of one
room and half of the floor. So [there
was half] we were crossing the room
walking on the remaining section of the floor
To reach our classroom.
The sister's voice calling, warning, as
some as by curiosity we would come closer
to peek down to the floor below where the
remains of the roof were still piling up
in a contorted desperate composition.
So back to Ravanese we had acquired
a life experiences, we had survived
and we had learned to compare by experience
life before and after, life during war and
life after war. Still very poor, glass
missing at our windows, no toys, other than
the *ciaramite* little broken pieces of floor tiles
found in the unpaved courtyard, a piece of
colored glass as an invaluable
treasure playing with other neighboring
children.
Crossing every morning the military
airport to go to the beach, we
stopped half way at the remains of the
war planes, scrunching under their opened
bellies doors, what are those for, to hold the
bombs, stay away children, it may be dangerous
the warning Mom's voice always present and
protective of us. Life was good now

the tactile presence of those unusable planes reinforcing
our memory our experience, reassuring presence
while every morning we would go by, ready
to jump on the boulders, the cold sea water
splashing from one puddle to the other,
and finally there is fresh water we can
drink it, an incredible little tiny *sorgente*
right from the sand. Many many years
later I shared this memory with
my friend Giammarco and with an *usciere*
of a museum who had lived in
Ravagnese and had drank at that *sorgente*.
So we shared that experience. Experience
of peace, memory of peace.

We returned to Troina many years later
and wanted to find the cave where about
30 farmer people from Troina had found refuge during
the bombing of the town, looking
for the tree where dad had hung his
mirror to shave, while a soft undulating
shouting, *gli americani, gli americani*, *accoglievano*
the long line of soldiers marching on
the narrow path at the edge of the dried
torrent bed. Dad who had fought as captain during
the 1st world war, now in the reserve with us, for
him too memories had turned alive and
burning, now older with family and
young children to protect, take care, worry
about. The Americans throwing at us chewing gum,
am-lires, cigarette rolling paper, candies,
the Americans who a week before had
killed Angelina on a single plane raid,
just to kill an innocent girl. Kill any
thing that moves on older farm, two
young girls playing in the farm courtyard

why? Grandmother *busiava* fresh pasta
in the kitchen, half deaf. Ah the children
are making so much noise on the roof.
The children are dead, Grandma. The noise
is the bomb exploded in the air.

Back to Ravagnese, we are busy now
going to the farm to buy *uova gallate* to
make chicks, porcellini d'india in the cages
welcoming us bringing them food,
arance amare red, splendid on the trees.
The radio Telefunken suddenly
making noises and a voice of a man
inside the radio, little Cicì would
ask dad. Yes, Dad would answer and
laughed blinking his eyes to me, older
daughter.
Then one late afternoon we would stay at the
beach for a long time after it was
dark on our return through the airport field.
Chi siete, alt là, chi va là, fermi tutti o sparo
the loud voice of a *soldato*, *sono il professore*
Rizzo con la sua famiglia returning from the beach.
At this hour of the night?
Still exposed, still someone ready
to kill us with the click of his finger.
I didn't have super thoughts or philosophical
positions. Faith, religiously infused by
Mom was protecting us. The idea of death
was still everyday thought, unavoidably as a matter of fact
in this passing of life, life a test to go through
on the way to the final test, death, that
would open access to after life.
So the knowledge idea of death was in my every day life at
such an early age and fear was not connected
to it in my mind, because of faith and

no sense of guilt, as can be now
at a late age, as now there
is *conscenza* of my life having
been a test, a proof and the responsibility
coming from it. Once I met a monk, his
his view remained with me
an inspiration in my life. Any thing
that happens now to be view in relation
to future life. So things lose their
importance, details that seem to be so important
in turn this gives me energy, constant determination.
Family laughs at my firm mania position of
not throwing away any food, not even a
crumb. This is not a response to
the awareness of hunger in the world, but
at base is a burning memory of [those]
early memories of having to share food [need].
The only special food in my early years, the pizza mom
would make in front of the wood burning oven
in the upstairs dark kitchen in Troina
and the other, after the end of the war, in
Reggio, when our uncle came visiting.
He had been a 'resident in Africa' as
it was called then, and then a prisoner
of the English [army]. He arrived one day
and mom religiously opened the *vetrina*
where she had saved for him the traditional
confetti, sugar coated almonds, for him,
for the birth of my brother
Cicì, who was then 4 ½ years old.
He did something special for us: he
read our lovely stories from the
Enciclopedia dei ragazzi UTET.
Cicì and I had been reading in turn to
each other. He could go on for hours,
the magic for us of listening without

having to read in turn and, most
sweet, take us to the local patisserie
to choose anything we wanted and
as much as we wanted. That was the
first time in our life that this would
happen, anything as much as we wanted
was not in our daily dictionary and
sweet stuff was not in our diet, very
poor and basic, other than plain
dry figs or raisins straight
from the farm. Rare had been in Troina *mostarda*, the
sweetened jelly from dried up cooked *mosto* of
grapes, before making wine.
My mom was not a chef nor a baker, so
we had counted on the farmers good heart
to satisfy our cravings for special food.
In Ravagnese sometimes Mom and Dad would
take us to Reggio, the city and there
an ice cream cone would turn to be a treat.

Persimmons [*]

September 21, 1952. I get off the train from Palermo to Casteldaccia. One kilometre up the hill on the winding road between the centenary olive groves, at both sides of the road. We have to wait until 2:30 to catch the train together with Francesco, dragging our bags from school. I am hungry and thirsty, the snack long gone this tepid afternoon of November, the sun shines high and warm on the skin of my bare legs and my skinny arms. No breeze to move the long heavy hair hanging on my shoulders. We look at the olive trees.

The silver of their leaves solidified in the still air: soon the black olives are ready to be picked. Are they going really to be picked, I wonder, the ones hanging on the street, one by one, the women sweating under the sun, beating the slender branches that will release the olives on the white linens spread on the hardened clay that has become solid and totally changed after so many months of summer?

The last bend of the road takes us to Via Lungarini and soon to the *portone* di nonna Caterina's house. Nonna has just died last spring, but the house smells of her presence even if mom makes now the home made bread in the brick oven down stairs. The kiln is made from olive pits and has a very sweet strong rich scent when burned and the bread tastes and smells deliciously. The oil and wine in the *rovere* kegs is still nonna Caterina's harvest of last year. Even the cake is the one she made last spring. It does not matter much if black cockroaches crawl up and down under the black pile. Don't go too close, you'll get dirty trying to scare them away, Mom says. But it's useless and as soon as she turns away we dip our hand into the warm light, dry powdery remains of the lemon branches trimmed away to restore lightness and health to the lemon trees.

I saw once last spring how nonna Caterina made coal out of them. The branches were piled up by the *mezzadri* in sapient way under the direction of nonna Caterina, who had chosen the best spot, the flat area right behind "*la casa del pozzo"* where there was no wind, they were disposed in a sort of airy pyramid castle, with an open chimney at the center and an access at the

[*] Transcribed by Riccardo from Maria's handwritten draft.

base to reach centre when it's time to start the fire. The whole pyramid had been covered with soil, the same rich soil I was now contemplating behind the stone wall delimiting the asphalt of *Via della Stazione*. With a long stick, fire was set in the centre of the pyramid and then the *mezzadri* with shovels added more soil where a sudden smoke was breaking the seal, here and there, the breeze sending the acrid bluish dense air in our nostrils and the eyes wanted to cry but the pleasure was too great, and we did not move. Move away Ah! Yes! We will smell of smoke for the whole day, you will smell of smoke for the whole day.

The fire, without flame went on slowly for the whole many hours required until the pile was checked and decided that the slow oxidation had been completed and had transformed the branches into coal.

Remembering this now, I approach the Via Lungarini and sense the warm smelly light bony texture that was used to cook Grandmother's bread, the whole wheat heavy bread that was floating in warm milk at morning breakfast. We did not like to eat this bread. We liked instead the bread we ate at zia Giovannina's house in the city. They had access to a special store where they could buy white bread, made with the American white flour. This bread spongy with absolutely no taste but soaked and filled with milk and when we brought it into our mouths, we squished all the milk out of it and the milk filled our mouth, between the teeth and the tongue, wet, sweet.

Milk had to be boiled those days. Every morning it was milked for us in Via Lungarini, in the centre of the road, by the milk man coming every morning with his cows and yelling, "Milk! Milk!" from door to door, and Dad came down with the aluminum *bollilatte* and bought one liter, just one liter a day for the whole family and we watched the nipples being squished into the *bollilatte* and the cow was all indifferent at that and so the milkman and Dad. This is the way it was in Casteldaccia in 1952 before nonna Caterina died. And now I dream about her, and dream that she is not dead, that it was a mistake and now she will be back and will bake our cookies and the vanilla perfume will tickle again our nostrils, while we play on the slippery roof.

We ring the bell and mom opens the door through a complicated system by which, from the kitchen hallway, she can look down through a tiny tiny hole down to the *portone* at the

ground floor and see who has come in. I don't see her but know she has pulled the wire connected to the door lock. That hole brings up the smell of olive oil and homemade wine and black coal, and the air coming from the entrance at ground floor is cold, touching our face. We jump up to reach the hole and look down. Mom smiles today, presenting us a plate of persimmons; she knows that we love this treat. We go to the deck, inset between two wings of the house that are almost curling around us to collect the remaining tepid sun, and cut away the breeze. Then jasmine on the south wall opens the new flowers of the day, a mixture of honey and scent, beloved by the grandmother bees.

We take in our hands one of the persimmons. Now it is us that curl our hands to hold safely the soft smooth skin with the hard woody remains of the flower structure. We close our eyes and dig our teeth in the sweet tender red-orange pulp, aware only of the noise our teeth and tongue biting and squishing the pulp against our palate. Our lips move towards the center of the persimmon and touch the bitter *lipposo* sack that contains the flat oval brown elongated seed. We count them one by one while our tongue frees each of them from their sack and then rolls the sensuous surface up and down the tongue and the palate and then against the teeth and spit it out, ready in a minute for another bite, and I wish, I tenderly wish nonna Caterina was back with us.

Ricordo [*]

Il lampadario di vetro azzurro del salottto di della zia Fina, il balcone, anzi, i tre balconi spalancati per gli ospiti venuti per godere della corsa dei cavalli, col brusio delle famiglie dei contadini giù sul marciapiedi. Ogni tanto una levata di coppola con un mezzo inchino e un 'bacio le mani' dipinto sulle labbra.

Anni dopo, quando il 'bacio le mani' e 'voscienza benedica' diventò 'buongiorno e buona sera', per la nonna cavaliera contadina fu uno shock dal quale fu difficile riprendersi.

Afferrata una gallina, le ingozzava fave secche invece che granoturco, e poi le faceva scendere aiutandola con la mano giù per il lungo collo. La gallina chiudeva le bianche palpabre e cercava di non soffocare.

Alla fine della corsa dei cavalli, nel salotto della zia Fina veniva offerto lo spongato, che Nunzia era andata a ordinare, servito nelle coppe di metallo. Era l'unica cerimonia che io ricordi nella quale si apriva la casa della zia Fina. Poi si tornava alla vita normale, sonnacchiosa giornaliera interrotta a tratti da una arborata di petardi di Piazza Matrice nei giorni di festa o dei confetti gettati dal balcone su una coppia di sposi che scendeva in processione lungo la 'stratura', manciate di confetti gettati sul marciapiedi ad attirare nugoli di ragazzini come mosche.

*

Si saliva per la scaletta ripida dalla stanza da letto di Nunzia su terrazza, abbacinati dalla luce improvvisa sul lastrico piastrallato, passando rasente strisciando sulla zucche essiccate che servivono come gallegianti alla vita, quando si andava al mare in acqua semi vestiti. E la giacca di fustagno nero e marrone, non ricordo, del nonno della zia Fina, e passando e strisciando veniva di inchinarsi al suono della voce della zia Fina che raccontava queste sue memorie con dolcezza e rimpianto. Da lì si passsava ad altri ricordi, della nonna Marianna, (?) venuta da lontano da Mirto in barca per tre giorni e tre notti, giovane sposa a questo zio che avrebbe pagato caro il prezzo di questo matrimonio fra consanguinei. E da lì si passava ad altre memorie più recenti. Al tempo della Spagnola che mieteva vittime e che in

[*] Trascritto da Riccardo dalla bozza manoscritta di Maria.

poche settimane aveva risparmiato le loro vite, ma si era preso l'udito di tre persone nella famiglia: la mamma della zia Fina, la zia Fina e lo zio Peppino suo fartello, che era in più rimasto con la voce semistrozzata. Così che quando era nei giardini pensavamo che fosse una capra o pecora che belava o un cane che abbaiava.

Lo zio Peppino faceva l'acqua di colonia con l'essenmza di zagara e noi bambini eravamo gli unici a vederlo la mattina in desabillè, che nei suoi termini signficava che non aveva ancora messo il colletto alla camicia. Mettere il colletto alla camicia era un rito mattutino che richiedeva una grande pazienza da parte della zia Fina, perchè mentre lo zio Peppino allungava il collo più che poteva, tirando indietro la testa per stirare la pelle afflosciata, la zia Fina doveva abbottonare il colletto rigido, duro e due misure più piccolo del collo. Cosa che richiedeva immobolità e respiro trattenuto da entrambi.

Dopo la tragedia che li colpì, lasciarono il palazzo Lungarini, si ritirarono a vita privata nella casa di Casteldaccia. La zia Fina non partecipò più ai balli, al teatro alle passgiate alla marina. Il fidanzato, che era in Africa, dietro sua richiesta, le rimandò indietro le foto che lei gli aveva mandato, e dopo non molto tempo sposò un'altra.

Allo zio Peppino, al quale mancava soltanto la tesi in giurisprudenza non venne consentito di completare gli studi. La zia Fina gli proibì di sposare Clara, una cugina alla quale lui era molto legato. Nonostante promesse che sarebbe stato un matrimonio senza figli, data la tara ereditaria, passò gli ultimi anni della sua vita a visitare Clara ogni sera nella casa accanto. Clara che sapeva suonare il piano, aveva una sorella Pina, da noi chiamata Pinò perchè era una eco di Clara nelle conversazioni. E comunque aveva un importante ruolo in questo strano menage.